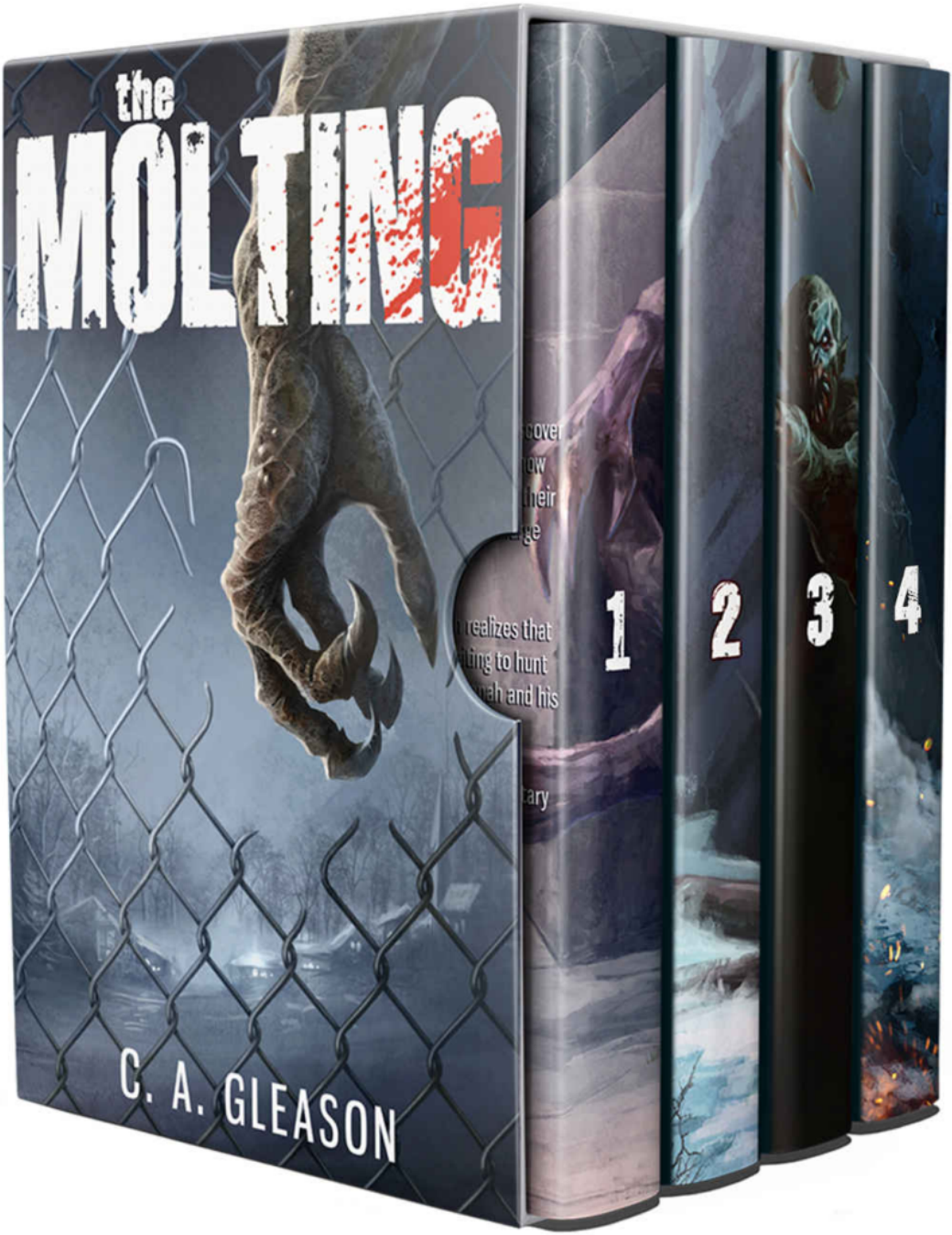

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THE MOLTING

BOOKS 1 - 4

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CHAPTER 1

Out for his walk while his dinner digested, Felix had his hands folded comfortably behind his back. His wife usually joined him, but she was not feeling well. The walk was not the same without her, and he almost did not go, but she had insisted. He hated to see her with influenza. She was such a strong woman, and it made him feel helpless. He was out a bit later than normal. It was nearly dark, and he was lost in thought without his wife to converse with.

His pace halted when he saw, out of the corner of his eye, something hanging from a tree. He had walked the same path through the hills after dinner, night after night, for the past thirteen years since they had moved to Saarbrucken, so anything out of the ordinary was noticeable.

An animal? Not like any he had ever seen. It was out of place—like a fish out of water, very alien. It was more like an egg, large and elongated, fatter at the bottom than at the top, and it was a stained-tobacco yellow, with dark splotches all over it. The skin pulsated, stretched, and looked as if it had small things swimming inside, trying to find their way out. The glistening organic sac of fluid bobbed toward the ground because of its weight; it was bound to snap the tree branch it hung from and split open, spewing its gooey contents.

Coldness suddenly consumed Felix, as if ice water had been injected into his veins. His gut told him to get away from it—and fast—and that it was dangerous. He took an involuntary step backward. Then curiosity got the better of him, and he slowly approached it again. He looked forward to his wife warming him in their bed while he told her what he had discovered.

It was some sort of cocoon, transparent to the depth of what was growing inside it. Initially, it looked like there were only small creatures inside. He was wrong. There was also something much bigger. The thing inside shifted, and Felix suddenly found himself looking directly into an open and inspecting eye. A tail broke through the top of the cocoon and stung him in the throat. Felix immediately tasted something like metal. He staggered backward and took a few short gasps, unable to breathe, and fell to the ground unconscious.

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CHAPTER 2

Sunlight slowly snaked its way over the ocean to the beach where Jonah had passed out, and he opened his eyes to its warmth. It took Jonah a few seconds to realize where he was. He'd forgotten how he got there, but someone had wanted him to be warm. He woke up in a sleeping bag and had a blanket over that. The haze of the night before slowly cleared from his mind.

He'd been at a party, a typical summer night in California. Too much tequila equaled waking up on the beach. He was sore, the kind of achiness he felt when he'd drunk too much and gotten into a fight. He remembered now. It wasn't last night. It was two nights ago. A drunken idiot had tossed his dirty inch of beer on a girl Jonah used to date. Jonah warned him that he'd been drinking too much. He was right, because the guy made the mistake of challenging him, cursing as he did, so Jonah gave him a beating after he got him to the ground. It was probably why he was sore; it took a lot of sudden strength to immobilize someone. Jonah couldn't remember if the guy had hit him with any punches. Jonah didn't think he had.

He probably wouldn't have fought so quickly if he were sober. Drinking was Jonah's way of staying off drugs, and a necessary evil. Only drugs get you kicked out of the military. You pay your taxes, bust your ass, and put your life on the line in a war for a government that doesn't give a shit about you, but you can't get high during downtime? It never made any sense to him.

Jonah threw the blanket off himself and unzipped his sleeping bag. It wasn't too cold, but it was cold enough for him to get goose bumps and dress in a hurry. Summer was almost over. Jonah wondered if his friends would be down for a trip. He was betting they would. The party scene was getting old.

Eric would be in; he was sure about that. He wanted Danielle to go. He'd been attracted to her since he and Sharon had gotten married. If he could convince Danielle to go, then Sharon would too. They were practically connected at the hip. His and Sharon's divorce had been final for a few years now, but they'd remained friendly. It was probably because they had the same group of friends. He'd told Sharon all about the places he traveled to. She'd always at least feigned interest, and if Daisy went, Gil definitely would. He'd just have to invite them in the right order to get a domino effect.

Gil was at a comic-book store when he finally started coming down from the night before. He'd been rolling too much lately. Jonah had introduced him to it in community college, but he didn't do it anymore. Jonah liked to drink instead. Gil had always been quiet and independent and was picked on a lot in high school. Jonah was the first athlete who was ever a friend to him. That's what Gil liked about him; he treated him like everyone else and was genuinely interested in what he had to say. The only times he'd ever seen Jonah angry

were when he drank too much or when he stuck up for his friends. Sometimes Jonah's temper scared Gil. It didn't seem possible that someone so affable could become so violent.

Gil was pretending to browse the new arrivals. He'd known what to expect. He was well aware of their release dates when they were posted online. The real reason he was there was to see the gorgeous young thing behind the counter again. He'd been in the store often since she'd been hired. She seemed to be acutely aware of how attractive she was too.

The only reason that he wanted to see her so much was to try to get over Daisy. Jonah had said that the best way to get over a chick was to find another one, to move on. That was easier said than done. He'd loved Daisy for a long time and was pretty sure she still had no idea, but the more he thought about it, the more he realized that it was just wishful thinking. She knew on a certain level, just as all women knew, that given the opportunity, any man would—

"Help you find something?"

The woman behind the counter had crept up behind him. Gil was startled but tried to appear calm. "No, uh, just browsing."

"Well, you've been looking at the same rack for about twenty minutes. Maybe I can suggest another rack to look at," she said.

Gil saw her cleavage out of his peripheral vision, but she was looking him right in the eye, almost daring him to get an intimate look at her. Gil swallowed.

"Sure is lovely outside. It's a shame I have to work all day."

She looked away, past him on purpose, Gil knew, allowing him the opportunity to stare at her. He did. Her breasts were beautiful. They looked so firm. He felt himself sweat. She looked back at him. It was a trick. She wanted to catch him, and her smile widened. Gil felt stupid. "I'd probably better get going."

"OK. Bye," she said, watching Gil hurry out of the store.

Gil looked back to see her laughing while looking in his direction.

Daisy was out. She'd decided to have a drink with her friends Tom and Mike. It was after their shift at the club where they all worked.

"Shouldn't have broken the seal," Mike said, sliding off his barstool.

Tom watched Mike disappear into the crowd. Then he turned to Daisy. "You want to get out of here?"

"I just got here. I'm not even drunk yet," Daisy said in her high voice. On numerous occasions, people had commented that she sounded like a little girl. One of the reasons she liked Tom was that he'd never mentioned it. "What about Mike?"

"What about him?" Tom said.

Daisy sipped her beer while judging Tom's eyes. She'd seen that look

before and given him what he wanted. But she hadn't slept with him in a while. She'd been spending her time with Mike. They'd fooled around but hadn't gone all the way. She could tell that Mike wasn't quite right for her. She couldn't put her finger on why, but she just knew something wasn't there. She missed Tom, how enjoyable it was to spend time with him. She missed his touch. Maybe it was time to mix it up.

Mike came back and sat down. "Whew! About ten pounds lighter."

Tom laughed. Daisy smirked and stared down into her beer.

Mike cringed. "I mean, because of all of the beer I drank is now . . . Oh, that sounded not like I wanted it to sound. You two know what I mean?"

"Of course," Tom said.

"I think I'm going to get going," Daisy said.

Mike blushed. "Really, why?"

Tom didn't react at all.

"I'm not feeling well."

"I'll get the bill," Tom said.

"Thank you. I'll see you guys later," Daisy said, staring into Tom's eyes as she passed.

Both watched her go. Mike finished his beer.

"You don't think it's because of what I said do you?" Mike said.

"You mean the piss joke that sounded like a shit joke? Nah."

Mike shook his head. "You're a dick."

Tom threw a twenty on the table. "You have no idea."

Daisy paced her kitchen, talking on the phone.

"Who else is going? . . . Do you know what time it is, Jonah? . . . How long will we be gone? . . . I need to think about it . . . I said I'd think about it!"

There were a few light knocks at the door.

"I have to go. I'll talk to you later. Yes, I promise . . . I said I promise!" She ended the call and set her phone on the kitchen counter. "Golly!" Daisy opened the door. "Hi."

Tom came in, already kissing her, and she wrapped her arms around him.

"Jonah called," Eric said, blowing out smoke.

Danielle came back from the bathroom, naked. Eric pinched the cigarette butt between his lips and lifted the covers for her.

She got in and snuggled up to him. "Will you put that out?"

Eric mushed the butt into the ashtray on the nightstand.

"About Germany?" she said.

"Yeah."

"He called me too, but I haven't called him back. Did you talk to him, or did he just leave a message?"

"Left a message. Put my phone on vibrate. We were kind of busy."

She giggled and hugged him, burying her nose in his armpit. "Ooh, I love your smell."

"Don't," he said, and he turned her over on her side, spooning her.

"Oh, fine," she said. "Why Germany?"

"He was stationed there. Said you'd have to live there ten years to see everything."

"Who else is going? Hopefully, Daisy. Take the attention off of me."

"She is. And Gil."

"Of course."

"Sharon probably."

"How do you think he'll react to me and you?" she said.

"I don't know."

"Too smoky in here," she said and went to the window.

"It'll get too cold. Get back in bed."

Danielle slid the window open. "I like it cold." She hurried back, and Eric draped the covers back over her.

"We should probably tell him soon," he said. "Just to get it out of the way so there's no weirdness."

Danielle shook her head. "No weirdness."

"Don't make fun of me."

Danielle scooted closer to him. "Or what?"

"You're gonna get it."

"Oh, I hope so."

Sharon walked out to the smoking area on her break. There were only a few customers, which made time slow to a crawl. She worked just down the street from where Daisy did. Daisy had wanted her to work at the club too, but she'd decided on the restaurant.

Her phone rang, and she was expecting it. She'd received a text from Jonah that said he would call, and she'd already talked to Danielle about the trip. She answered it and lit up a cigarette.

"What? I'm the last one you ask?"

"I wanted to make sure everyone else was going before I asked you so you'd go."

Sharon smiled, blowing smoke. He could be very manipulative. They might still be married if they'd met at a different time, maybe when they were a little older, but certainly when he wasn't so into drugs. He had a strong tolerance for all substances, so it was hard to tell when he was under the influence of *whatever*. Sharon realized later that he was high when she had

met him.

"You can see all the places I told you about."

Jonah's infectious personality was hard to stay away from, even when she knew he was trouble. Before she realized it, she had been as into drugs as he was. Had she known how much of an addict he was, she never would have married him, but being so young and having so many happy times . . .

"You'll love it. I promise."

"Don't promise me anything."

"OK, gorgeous."

"I don't want to fight."

"I'm not fighting with you. I just—"

"I mean when we're there. I don't want to fight with you."

"So don't pick a fight with me then. Our fights were always up to you."

He was already doing it. What he always did. What he was always somehow able to do. It was never his fault.

"Just concentrate on being on your best behavior," Sharon said, blowing out smoke.

"Of course. I gotta go. I'll call you with all the details later."

"OK. Bye."

"Bye!"

She ended the call. She dropped her cigarette, stepped on it, hesitated, and then lit another.

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CHAPTER 3

Felix vaguely remembered the cocoon hanging from the tree, but he couldn't remember where he was going when it had happened. Mostly he remembered the pain of its sting, even though it had subsided to just a dull throbbing now. His thoughts were coming in slow flashes. He had trouble remembering where he lived. He was lost and wasn't sure how far he'd walked or even why he was heading in the direction he was.

All he cared about now was getting somewhere warm. It seemed to be getting colder by the minute as he trudged up the road in the night. The active chimneys of the homes in the valley next to the road created a smoky blanket that hovered over the rooftops.

A truck was approaching from behind him. Felix held up his hand. The driver honked and pulled over. Felix quickened his pace, anticipating how cozy the driver's cab would be. He reached up and opened the door, immediately feeling heat billow out.

"*Wohin gehst du?*" the driver said.

"*So weit wie du mich nehme. Ich brauche nur etwas schlaf zu bekommen und warm*," Felix said.

The driver nodded. He threw the stick into gear, and Felix climbed inside the inviting cab.

They'd probably driven nearly two hundred kilometers when the driver's guest started making strange noises while he slept. The driver had tried to speak with him for the last few hours, but he hadn't responded. He knew he was still alive, though; he could see the jacket he'd pulled over his face moving with each breath.

Felix's hand suddenly dragged the jacket off. He was staring at the driver and making movements with his mouth as if he couldn't breathe. He kept opening his mouth, about to say something or let something crawl out that was clogging his throat.

"*Sind Sie okay?*" the driver said.

Felix's skin split down the middle of his face like a perfect seam, revealing a creature underneath, as if it were wearing his flesh as a disguise. The driver had a few seconds to scramble before it attacked him.

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CHAPTER 4

Their train snaked through the German mountains. Jonah sat next to Eric, Danielle sat next to Sharon, and Gil sat next to Daisy.

Jonah produced a fifth of whiskey from his bag. "Anybody want a pull?"

It had become a tradition that anytime they all got together, Jonah would pull out a bottle of alcohol. Sharon knew it was how he was raised. His parents drank at any special occasion and most nights. Jonah had told her his dad started making him drinks when he was about thirteen.

Eric put his hand out, and Jonah passed it to him. Eric took a drink and handed it back.

"Danielle, you want a drink?"

"I'm OK."

"I didn't ask if you were OK," Jonah said, taking a drink himself. "I asked if you wanted a drink."

"No, thanks."

"All right. Suit yourself. Daisy wants one, though."

"Fuck yeah, I do!" Daisy said.

When she stood up, her shirt lifted, exposing her belly. Sharon saw Gil blush.

Eric got up, and Daisy sat next to Jonah. Eric went back and sat next to Gil.

After Jonah handed her the bottle, she chugged it. "Easy, Daze," he said.

Daisy stopped. She peeled her lips off the bottle and coughed. "Woo!"

"Pace yourself," Sharon said.

Jonah put his arm around her. "I got her."

"Oh, OK, Jonah. We all know how that ends up."

Everyone laughed except Gil.

It usually only took a few drinks for Daisy and Jonah to hook up. That's what hurt Gil the most—that his best friend was able to do what he was incapable of, which was being close to the woman he loved more than any other he had in his life. Jonah told Gil that they'd slept together the first night they met, and it had been going on and off ever since, except when he and Sharon were married.

It was strange, but Gil often felt a mixture of pain and pleasure when he was around Daisy. When he was close, it took all of his strength not to reach out and hold her, kiss her, or tell her how he felt. It was even more painful because of how frequently they spent time together as a group. Sometimes he wished he were in a different group of friends. That way he wouldn't have to deal with his feelings for her every time he saw her. He wished he could stop thinking about her.

He tried not looking directly at her for a while, but she didn't like that, so he had to stop "acting weird." She loved the attention, needed it, even from her friends and those she'd never slept with. He dreamed about her almost

every night. She was his last thought before he went to sleep and his first thought when he woke up.

Sometimes he wished she didn't exist, which always made him feel guilty. When he'd talked to Jonah about it—which he tended to do incessantly—he'd usually suggest finding someone who liked him back. It was easy for him to say that; he always got to choose which woman he wanted. Gil had told Jonah about the woman in the comic-book store, and Jonah had said that she was into him. Gil had a hard time believing that. She was so gorgeous.

Gil was pretty sure that Daisy knew how he felt. He hid it at first, but the stronger his feelings became, the more he wanted to express them and forgo the chance of embarrassment he supposed he'd feel. What was the worst that could happen?

"Can I have a sip, Daisy?" Gil said.

"No sips, pussy," Daisy said with a straight face. "Pulls."

Jonah and Eric looked at each other and busted up laughing.

"Daisy, can I have a pull?" Gil's voice was nearly a whisper.

Daisy's eyes rolled. "It isn't mine to give."

Jonah caught her gaze and furrowed his brow. Daisy mouthed, "What?"

"Hell yeah, Gil," Jonah said. "Take it to him."

Daisy got up. "Don't tell me what to do."

"You like it when I tell you what to do."

Daisy smiled and walked the bottle back to Gil, moving her hips side to side. "We call this 'liquid courage' around here."

"Why would I need liquid courage?"

"To find a German hottie. You need to get laid, Gil. I can tell."

Gil blushed, forcing a smile. He watched Daisy walk back to her seat. The pull he took from the bottle couldn't rid his stomach of the pit that had formed there. Women seemed to have no idea how devastating their words could be.

The bottle was empty by the time the train stopped. Jonah and Eric had seen to that. All dozed except Sharon, who was reading a book. On the cover a muscular man with no shirt held a woman in his arms, their mouths nearly touching.

Jonah opened his eyes and looked out the window. The sign read "OBERSTEIN." "Wake up. We're here."

Sharon placed her bookmark and closed the pages on it.

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CHAPTER 5

Techno could be heard pounding over the sound system from the bathroom, where Eric and Jonah were washing their hands.

"Why are all the lights blue?" Eric said.

A local man washed his hands next to them. "*So können Drogenabhängigen ihre Adern nicht sehen*. Ugly American."

"What the fuck did you say?" Eric shouted.

Jonah looked over and stared the man in the eyes. "He said so the drug addicts can't see their veins." The local turned to face Jonah, clearly wanting a fight. The alcohol Jonah had put down on the train had already exited his system, so, now sober and lucid, he smiled and stepped in front of Eric, and he faced the local. "It's all right, man. We're just here to have a good time."

Eric moved to get the local in view.

Jonah moved his head in line with Eric when he did. "Right?"

Eric relaxed. "Right."

"Let's go."

Both left the bathroom. The local dried his hands on the continuous cloth towel, watching them leave.

All were on the dance floor.

"Shouldn't we be seeing sights?" Daisy yelled at Jonah.

"What the fuck are we going to see at night?" Jonah yelled back at her, pinching her arm.

She laughed and scooted away from him, dancing near Gil.

Jonah tried to kiss Danielle on the cheek.

"No, thank you, Jonah," she said, making her way to the bar.

"I'm just playing around. You don't have to leave." Jonah noticed everyone was staring at him. "What the hell is wrong with everyone? I just—"

"We're dating," Eric said.

Jealousy flashed across Jonah's face.

"We were meaning to tell you, but—"

"But you wanted to wait until I made a fucking move on her?"

Eric shrugged. He looked uncomfortable but seemed glad it was out in the open.

Jonah studied him. He'd always liked Danielle, even though he never got anywhere with her. He thought she was kind of boring when they'd first met—meaning, he'd have to date her for a while before she slept with him.

Over the years he had started to think that a drama-free woman was just what he needed. Most of the women he'd dated had cheated on him. He was starting to think that most would. He could tell Danielle would be loyal, and he knew how kind she was. It was her vibe, but there were plenty of other

women to choose from if she were taken, especially by his best friend.

"That's great," Jonah said, putting an arm around Eric's shoulders, directing him toward the bar where Danielle was sitting. "But in the future, make sure you inform me of shit I need to know."

Daisy was watching Jonah from the dance floor.

Jonah turned toward the bartender. "Shots!"

Music pounded the club to the point where a conversation was nearly impossible. The tempo had changed. It was faster and more frenetic. There had been a few rounds of shots—enough to entice the girls back to the dance floor, probably for the rest of the night.

But not Jonah and Eric. They were still at the bar.

Jonah dry-heaved. "Gotta piss."

He drank another shot before making his way to the bathroom, making Eric cringe.

Eric eyed Danielle while she was dancing. She gave him a mischievous smile and joined him at the bar. She kissed him. Sharon and Gil danced close to each other. The other dancers then absorbed them.

Jonah was on his way out of a stall. Daisy slammed against him with a kiss, forcing him back in. She liked to surprise him.

Jonah shut the door and pulled Daisy's skirt above her waist. He turned her around, bent her over, and took her. He reached both hands under her shirt.

"Oh, Jonah!" she groaned, clutching the walls of the stall.

Jonah appeared behind Eric and turned him away from Danielle. "Round five, or six, or ten, or whatever the fuck it is."

Behind him a waitress carried a tray filled with shots. Each had a different kind of alcohol. Jonah took the first and threw it down his throat. He smiled at Daisy as she walked past. She returned the smile and joined the others on the dance floor.

Eric watched Jonah, concerned.

"Fuck you," Jonah said and drank one shot after the other.

Eric grabbed the last three and drank them before Jonah could get to them, then went dancing with the others. Sharon caught Jonah's bleary gaze. Worry was all over her face. Jonah smiled back.

He'd seen that look before, but he wasn't going to let her ruin his good time, which she always tried to do. He wasn't going to let that happen. Not

here. Not in Germany.

Jonah sensed his friends getting apprehensive around him when he got drunk. He suspected that they thought it changed him. It was like an out-of-body experience, and he was unable to control himself. He'd just deal with it tomorrow. Right now he wanted to enjoy himself.

The local, the one from the bathroom earlier in the night, made a comment to his buddy as he walked by.

Jonah stepped in front of him. "You wanna see an ugly American?"

Jonah saw double and swung at the wrong one, stumbling into a table. People laughed. The local taunted Jonah, sticking his chin out and showing off to his friends. That was a mistake. He wasn't dealing with sober Jonah now.

After he was at an appropriate distance considering his intoxication, Jonah rocked the local with solid punches to the sides of his face. The swelling was immediate. Then Jonah went after his nose.

Sharon saw what Jonah was doing, and her dancing slowed. Not again. He shouldn't drink—ever. She saw a bouncer moving toward the commotion.

Jonah had the local on the ground and was pummeling him. He was bloody and was doing his best to deflect Jonah's fists, but he was failing.

Sharon headed for the bouncer. Her skimpy red dress showed off her voluptuous body and sun-kissed skin.

The local's buddy tried to pull Jonah off. Jonah pitched him down some nearby stairs, and he landed on the dance floor, causing most to turn in his direction, wondering what was going on.

Gil and Daisy ran over to Eric and Danielle. Eric turned.

Sharon faked rolling her ankle near the bouncer, and he caught her by the hand. "Oh, thank you."

She bent over to straighten her heel, showing off her deep cleavage.

Eric grabbed Jonah by the waist. Jonah was now yelling at the group of men in German, and Eric pulled him toward the exit, where the others were already heading.

The bouncer released Sharon's hand. She watched him search for Jonah . . . Only he couldn't spot him. She took a few steps back, then disappeared into the crowd.

Sharon and Danielle were outside their hotel, sharing a cigarette. The night was clear and cold, which probably meant the next day would be sunny. The men were inside asleep. They could hear Jonah snoring.

"He's such a different person when he drinks," Danielle said.

"Where were you before I married him?" Sharon said.

Danielle smirked, handing the cigarette back to Sharon. She took a long drag.

"He knows just what to say," Sharon said. "Makes you feel special, and

when you're with him, it's like you're the only two people in the world. Everything around you is just a quiet blur."

"Do you still love him?"

"Oh, I'll always love him."

Danielle saw Sharon think back, her eyes distant. Danielle reached for the cigarette, and Sharon snapped out of it, handing it to her.

"Plus he's hung and hot," Sharon said and laughed.

Danielle laughed too. "Yep, there's always that."

"How did he take it when he found out about you two?"

"Eric said he seemed fine about it. We'll see how he acts in the morning."

Sharon dropped the butt and stepped it out. "Yes, we will."

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CHAPTER 6

They were outside as the van warmed up, chugging hot exhaust in a way that was only visible on a clear, crisp morning. Jonah was still sleeping. No one wanted to wake him up.

"I'll do it," Daisy said.

"He's grumpy in the morning," Sharon said.

"Trust me, I know!"

Danielle saw Gil glance down. He looked as if he had been kicked in the stomach.

Daisy jumped up and down on the bed. "Wake up, Jonah! Wake up!"

"What are you doing?" he said.

"It's time to go!"

"Get off!"

"We're leaving! The bus is leaving!"

"Get the fuck off!"

Daisy froze. She stepped down off the bed.

"What time is it?"

"It's morning."

"Damn it, Daisy! You know I'm hung over. Did you think I would think that was funny?"

"Yes."

"Well, it fucking isn't!"

"You don't have to swear."

Daisy stood there, not moving. Jonah usually got mad fast, then apologized shortly after. He always tried to stay angry, especially when whomever he was mad at deserved it, but it never lasted.

Jonah knew that she knew this, because he'd told her before, and knowing she knew made him even madder for some reason. He wasn't going to give in this time. His head throbbed, and his brain felt like a dry sponge. He had dreamed of chugging a fruit-punch sports drink with tiny chips of ice in it.

"Get out!" Jonah yelled and put the pillow over his head.

"We're leaving," she said and closed the door behind her.

The passenger door opened, and Jonah got in.

Eric put the van in drive. "Here we go."

Jonah stole a look back at everyone. Danielle and Sharon were on the middle seat. Daisy was next to Gil in the back seat; she was as far away from him as possible. This wasn't an accident.

Daisy was heated. She'd get over it. She always did. However, they were on vacation. If he didn't make up to her now, she would probably stay mad until after they got back from the trip, or longer. The problem was that he was still irritated at how she had woken him up.

As they rode in silence, Jonah could feel the group's anxiety. He needed to lighten things up, so he turned around. Daisy looked away, out the window of course, ignoring him. He stared at her for a while, waiting for her to make eye contact, and then realizing she wouldn't. "Daisy."

She pretended not to hear him.

"Daisy . . . Daisy . . . Daisy . . . Daisy . . . Daisy . . . Daisy . . ."

She cracked a smile and stole a glance in his direction.

"Aha!" Jonah said, pointing.

The smile vanished, and she resumed looking out the window.

"Daisy . . . Daisy . . . Daisy . . ."

"Will you answer him, please?!" Eric said.

Everyone laughed.

"Yes, Jonah?" Daisy said in her sweet, high-pitched voice.

"I'm sorry for being grumpy and yelling at you and swearing at you."

"You swore at her?" Eric said.

"It's OK," Daisy said.

"No, it isn't," Jonah said. "I'm really sorry. To be honest, I feel sad about hurting your feelings and making you cry and all that."

"I didn't cry!"

"I'd say it's mostly your fault that we're both miserable."

Daisy giggled and shook her head. "Der . . . OK, Jonah."

"Who wants to hear some tunes?"

They all shouted a different band at once.

"Nah, none of that sounds good," Jonah said. "I'll pick something."

"Something good, please," Eric said.

"Always."

"You're biased!"

Jonah selected one of Daisy's favorites. Eric groaned.

"Quiet down," Jonah said to him, turning back to look at Daisy. She winked back at him.

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CHAPTER 7

The group stared at a church built into the side of a cliff. Above it was an old castle.

"It's beautiful," Sharon said. "I remember you telling me about it, but it's incredible to see it in person."

"Why was the church built there?" Daisy said.

"Two brothers unknowingly loved the same woman, and the younger one married her while the older brother was away," Jonah said. "When he returned he flew into a rage and threw his younger brother out a window. Years later, guilt-ridden, he built a church at the spot where his brother's body fell."

"I bet you used this to get a few local ladies out of their skirts," Eric said.

Danielle shook her head at him.

"Not in front of Sharon, man," Jonah said.

"I don't mind," Sharon said. "Say whatever."

Jonah looked over at Eric. "Thanks."

"What's it matter? You aren't even married anymore."

"You're an asshole."

"This I know." Eric leaned in close to Jonah. "Seriously, you try to make out with my girlfriend, but you can't talk about other women you were with?"

Jonah laughed. "Shut up."

The path curved behind the cliff, and they were halfway up.

Jonah turned so he could be heard. "You should see it up here. It's beautiful. Overlooks the whole town."

Daisy quickened her pace and caught up with Jonah, who was leading their little expedition.

Gil was last and a little out of gas. Being heavy and a chain smoker made a hike a pain in the ass. He didn't say anything about it, though. He wished he were in shape like Jonah or Eric. Maybe then Daisy would think of him differently. All women probably would. He'd pretty much woken up overweight one day. He hadn't realized it had happened; it just did, probably from all the beer he had drunk with his friends.

When they partied Gil would usually forget about food until night, when he was famished, and then he'd overeat—hence the belly. He hated the feeling of the extra weight around his midsection when he tied his shoes. He also hated the look on a woman's face the few times he'd been lucky enough to get naked with one. He could tell these women found his body repulsive. There was one benefit from being friends with Jonah: he attracted a lot of women, and they all couldn't sleep with him. Gil got his pick of the litter on a few late nights. He decided then and there that he was going to start exercising when he got back home.

“Hurry up, Gil!” Eric yelled. “I’m not spending the night here!”

Eric broke Gil’s train of thought. “I’m coming, jerk!”

They stood at the top, overlooking the city as Jonah had said they would.

“I didn’t realize we’d be up so high,” Danielle said.

Indeed they were. The homes and businesses below looked as small as the miniature houses of a popular board game. Traffic below moved in slow motion.

“The first time I came up here was when I first arrived in Germany. A buddy from basic took me.”

“It’s nice, Jonah,” Eric said.

Jonah looked over at him as if he didn’t think he was being genuine.

Eric held his hands up. “Seriously!”

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CHAPTER 8

Jonah was driving them to Berlin. It was one of the places he'd wanted to visit and never did when he was stationed in Germany. It was still dark, but the sun would be rising soon. Jonah had woken everybody up to make up for his attitude the previous morning, and they had gotten off to an early start. Gil had offered to take over earlier, but he'd refused his offer. He liked to drive.

The girls were having a notably involved conversation, judging by how animated they were, but he couldn't hear them. Sometimes it was hard to tell when women were talking about something serious or trivial.

Being back in Germany reminded Jonah of how much time he'd spent there and how hard he'd worked; of how much blood he'd spilled for his country, for the military. Had he known it would all get flushed down the toilet for something as meaningless as pissing hot during a drug test, he would have told them to take their "always give 110 percent" and shove it up their asses.

What a waste of his time. Sure, he'd been stupid and made a mistake, but the military should understand that most people come in around age eighteen and are still kids. Kids made mistakes because they're learning. Jonah knew that the military couldn't condone drug use, but the respect he'd earned—the way his superiors treated him—totally dissipated when he'd failed that drug test, as if all he'd done before it didn't matter.

"What's all this about?" Eric said.

Up ahead were a group of men in the road. Wait, they were moving as if something were wrong with them. In fact, they looked less and less like men the closer they got. A few lunged at the van when it passed.

"What the hell?" Jonah said.

The men could be seen chasing the van from the rearview mirror. Jonah accelerated, watching them disappear into the darkness.

"Jonah, look out!" Eric yelled.

Jonah looked back at the road again to see a car parked in his lane. "Shit!" He pulled hard to the left, and the tires skidded off the road. Then he yanked the wheel hard to the right and overcorrected. The van veered off the road and flipped.

As Jonah regained consciousness, he realized someone was shaking him. Then he felt the cold bite of morning.

"Wake up!" Eric said.

Jonah opened his eyes. The sun was just beginning to rise into view. "What happened?"

"He's OK," Eric said. "We crashed."

"How did I get here?"

“I pulled you out,” Gil said.

His voice came from out of view. Jonah rose up and peered around to see his friends all in one piece, staring at him, except Daisy. Her head was in Sharon’s lap.

Jonah stood and walked over to them. “What’s wrong with her?”

“As far as we can tell she’s fine,” Sharon said, wiping tears from her cheeks. “We just can’t get her to wake up.”

Jonah felt for a pulse on her neck. She had one. “Probably knocked out cold.”

“Eric says he saw an animal on her back, but it disappeared into the woods,” Sharon said.

“Something small,” Eric said.

Jonah touched the side of his head. “Where are those men?”

“I saw them,” Danielle said.

“So did I,” Gil said. “You OK, Jonah?”

Jonah nodded. “The way they moved . . . Too fast, hunched; very, very odd.”

“It was creepy. Haven’t seen them again, though,” Eric said.

Jonah took in their surroundings. “I know where we are. There’s a hospital nearby.”

“The van is totaled,” Eric said.

Jonah and Eric jogged back to the car they’d almost hit.

“What the hell, man?” Eric said.

Jonah shook his head. “I have no idea.”

His friend was right to be alarmed, and Jonah was glad he had the decency to voice his concern to him and not in front of the others.

“What’s wrong with her?” Eric said.

“We need to get to the hospital.”

“I’d heard Europeans were weird.”

Jonah knew Eric was trying to lighten things up, but Jonah couldn’t acknowledge his friend’s joke. Whatever was wrong with those men wasn’t natural. They looked sick, ill—malformed, even. He wondered if they were contagious.

Eric was breathing hard already, but Jonah wasn’t. The amount of running a soldier did while in the military practically carved out more room for air in the lungs.

The other car was an old station wagon. No one was inside. Fortunately for them, the keys were still in it.

“Where do you think they went?” Eric said.

Jonah shook his head. He didn’t say it, but he guessed those strange men were somehow involved.

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CHAPTER 9

They pulled up to the hospital. The morning sun was just starting to blanket the dew-encrusted grass with its warmth.

Jonah got out of the passenger seat and pulled the rear door open. “I’ll get her head.”

“Jonah, I don’t see anyone,” Sharon said.

Jonah turned and looked toward the hospital.

“Looks deserted,” Gil said.

There wasn’t one light on. Their breath punched out their mouths in the morning cold.

“I’ll go check it out,” Jonah said.

Eric shut the driver’s side door. “I’ll come with you.”

“Stay with the girls,” Jonah said to Gil.

“OK,” he said.

Jonah and Eric went to the front of the hospital and found it chained shut from the inside. Jonah cupped his eyes to the glass.

“Anyone?” Eric said.

Jonah searched for another way in. “No. It doesn’t make any sense.”

“Is there somewhere else we can get supplies?”

“I don’t even know what’s wrong with her,” Jonah said, taking a moment to think. “But yeah, there is.”

“What are all those?”

There were mounds of dirt in the grass—like large molehills.

“I don’t know. Who cares?! Help me find a way in.”

“Let’s just break the glass,” Eric said.

“No, it’s locked up.”

“Meaning?”

“Meaning they didn’t want something to get out.”

“Or in. Maybe we should go?” Eric said.

Jonah opened the car door, and everyone inside leaned forward to hear him. “The base I was stationed at is only a few miles from here. I think it’s best we go there.”

“We’re leaving?” Sharon said.

“There’s no one here.”

“Did you go inside?”

“No.”

“Then how do you know?”

“There’s something . . .”

“What?”

“Wrong. I don’t think it’s safe.”

“How can a hospital not be safe?”

“I tried my phone, but we couldn’t get a hold of anyone,” Danielle said.

“This is a dead spot,” Jonah said. “I think it’s the mountains.”

“Would have been nice to know beforehand,” Sharon said.

Jonah stared back at her and then looked at the others. “You’re all going to have to trust me.”

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***Son of a** bitch!* Jonah thought.

He didn't show his reaction. There was no sense alarming the others, but the base looked deserted too! There were no guards at the guard shack waiting to examine vehicles to make sure there weren't any explosives tucked underneath somewhere, no soldiers doing physical training, and none in the motor pool. No sign of any soldiers, period. "Hmm."

"What's going on?" Sharon said.

"I'm not sure."

There were utility vehicles (UVs) with .50-caliber machine guns attached at the gunners' hatches in a fortified position, as if the soldiers were anticipating a wave of enemies. One of the UVs was on its side.

Eric leaned forward from the bench seat behind him. "You sure about this?"

"Yes. Know it like the back of my hand."

And he did. The rectangular base was on a hill above Oberstein, which rested in a valley. They entered from the west, passing one of the motor pools. The wash rack was on the east. The post office, mailroom, and physical-training field were to the north, with the other motor pool just south of the physical-training field. The dining facility, maintenance building, and headquarters were in the center. Jonah drove south, down toward the barracks, where he had lived while stationed there.

"Tons of guns," Gil said.

They were scattered everywhere. Spent round casings also littered the ground.

"I've been thinking about it. I don't remember seeing anyone since we got to this town," Danielle said.

"Me either," Gil said.

"I didn't either," Sharon said.

"It's typical for people to stay indoors in this country," Jonah said. "Except you're right. We haven't."

All were silent as Jonah parked in front of the Alpha battery barracks.

"What's a Molter?" Danielle said.

Over the entrance to the barracks, someone had written with black paint: MOLTERS ATTACKED 9/18 BEHEMOTH SPOTTED I.

The message didn't look finished. The battle had taken place within the last week.

Jonah turned around. "She's still breathing, right?"

"Yes," Sharon said. Daisy's head was resting on her lap.

"I was planning on only staying briefly to get Daisy help, but I think we should stay the night."

"Do you think it's safe?" Sharon said.

"I do. I'm sure there are supplies. There's reliable shelter that can be

locked up if we need to. We've already seen the weapons."

"Why would we need weapons?" Danielle said.

"We don't, but drawing from past experience, I always think worst-case scenario," Jonah said. "I just think being here is almost like . . . It's like staying at the scene of a crime. The criminals are long gone, and it's the safest place to be. Who knows how bad it is elsewhere? I know this town. We'll stay here until we can figure out what's going on and what to do next."

"We should call someone," Sharon said.

"I'll try the landline when we get indoors."

Danielle and Sharon held the door open as Jonah carried Daisy inside. Gil and Eric brought their backpacks in. There was no power on the base.

The barracks were three stories tall—four if you included the basement, where the arms room, offices, and extra supply rooms were. Jonah remembered seeing an old photo of the base from the early 1940s. A Nazi flag had flown high.

They settled in the dayroom down the hall of the first floor. Jonah set Daisy on one of the couches. Sharon sat next to her, brushing her hair away from her face. The others crowded around them.

"Come on, Daisy," Jonah said, patting her hand. "Come on, baby . . ." He rubbed her hand between his own. "Wake up . . . Come on, Daze."

She didn't respond. However, she looked healthy, and her chest rose and fell peacefully as she breathed.

Gil went over to the window and looked out. The entire town was in view. "Where's the church?"

"Who gives a shit?!" Eric said.

Gil spun as if he expected Eric to charge him. Realizing he should have thought before he spoke, he turned back toward the window. Danielle walked over to him and squeezed his shoulder. He turned and hugged her.

"Sorry," Eric said.

Gil nodded. "It's OK."

Danielle gave him a big squeeze and then walked over to Eric, who put his arm around her. Gil joined the group.

Jonah could feel his friends crumbling. He knew to expect childlike behavior from them—maybe even from himself. People were unpredictable in a time of crisis. Jonah knew he had to stay strong for everyone, no matter what. "We need to stay here for a day or two. Need to think of the best plan of action."

He looked at each of his friends. They stared back at him, but no one said anything; this was their way of silently agreeing. In a time like this, it was best to follow Jonah's lead. He knew it, and they all did too.

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CHAPTER 11

Jonah and Eric searched the rooms, but nothing useful turned up. They did find a lot of alcohol, though.

"We should get fucked up," Eric said.

"Come on."

"What the hell's your problem? I was only joking."

Jonah quickened his pace. "Just quit fuckin' around."

"Fine. Where to next?"

"Headquarters."

"We're walking?"

"You want a piggyback ride?"

It felt odd that he and Eric had to be serious. They'd always joked with each other and everyone around them. If they'd had a couple drinks, watch out. They were merciless, especially around women. They would try to one-up the other, to see who could get the most phone numbers, or even sleep with the most.

They'd teamed up on friends, verbally tearing them apart for their own amusement. A few had been reduced to tears. One of their buddies used to pass out with his mouth open. Jonah had poured a full shot of hot sauce in his mouth, and he'd woken up choking and confused. Jonah and Eric had laughed so hard that they could hardly catch their breath.

Once, in college, they had sneaked into another friend's room, handcuffed him to his bed, and covered him in shaving cream. Jonah and Eric then went to breakfast, and they hadn't unlocked him in the afternoon. The three weren't friends after that. Jonah remembered thinking how funny he thought that his friend overreacting was. Now he felt shameful about it. It was mean.

Jonah liked to goof around, but he felt like an entirely different person when the shit hit the fan. He wasn't sure how, but it was as if he'd always had an inner adult he could access, even when he was just a dumb kid.

Now that man was present, and he had to deal with Eric, who was still a child. In America you are technically an adult at eighteen; however, Jonah had no doubt that most didn't grow up until their thirties, maybe even forties. Jonah and Eric had spent most of their time with each other drunk or under the influence of some other drug, so the dynamic between them was different under these new circumstances. They were strangers.

There was blast residue along the steps up to the headquarters building, and chunks of concrete were missing from the pillars. The soldiers had probably set mines.

The stench of death hit their nostrils as they approached the door. Eric pulled his shirt up to his nose. Jonah hadn't encountered it since the war. He didn't allow himself to react.

The door had been barricaded. It didn't hold. They stepped inside.

Outside, the headquarters building had been nearly the same as Jonah

remembered. Inside was a different story. The room was a fog of flies, making it difficult to see. Both he and Eric swatted endlessly, annoyed to the point of anger after only moments of doing so, trying to make sense of the chaos. The place was torn apart. The soldiers had retreated there and seemed to use every piece of furniture as a barricade to hide. It had only been temporary. Then they saw what remained of the men.

"That's disgusting!" Eric said.

There were mushy piles of flesh throughout the room. It looked as if the soldiers had been skinned.

"Now that's what I call having a bad day," Eric said.

Jonah wondered how it was possible that some people could be so detached about death that they could joke about it. It unnerved him. Those had been people; they were married and had mothers, fathers, brothers, sisters, and children. For some, making light of such a horrible situation was the best way to deal with it, which was essentially not dealing with it at all. In a way, Jonah envied such people.

"Good thing the girls didn't see this," Eric said.

"Good thing Gil didn't see this. We won't tell them. Come on, there's nothing here."

Fortunately, there were MREs and bottled water in the UVs at the entrance to the post. Jonah jumped into the driver's side of one UV that had the most supplies and tried the ignition. It started right up. Jonah exhaled with relief and then killed the engine.

He checked the UV thoroughly to see what else was in it. He found two flashlights that worked and plenty of boxes filled with chem lights, which stayed lit for hours. Those would be handy, especially since there was no power. He had no idea how much of the battery life from the flashlights had been expended.

He found a loaded 9mm pistol in a holster with extra clips and a few automatic rifles, but a lot of the ammo had been spent. After searching the vehicles, Jonah could only find seven loaded magazines. He'd have to check the arms room for more.

He took one of the weapons, pulled the charging handle back, and looked into the chamber: clear. Then he pushed the takedown pin and pivoted the upper receiver from the lower. After taking out the bolt, he looked down the barrel. The spiraled rifling was shined and immaculate. He reassembled the weapon and plugged a full magazine into the well, handing it to Eric. He grabbed another and checked the chamber, then loaded it too. He turned on one of the radios and grabbed the mic.

"Anybody copy, over?"

No response, no net traffic, nothing, not on any of the channels; just the droning hum of empty frequency. It was worth a try.

"We'll leave the vehicle here," Jonah said, pointing to their left. "The aid station is just over there."

They'd almost reached the aid station when Jonah stopped.

"What?" Eric said.

"Look," Jonah said, motioning to mounds of dirt that were everywhere.

"What do you think they are?" Eric said.

"Like the ones at the hospital."

"Yeah."

"Stay here."

Jonah ran back to one of the UVs. In the back was a rucksack. He knew he'd find what he was after. One thing about the military: they always put everything in a designated place.

Jonah returned with an entrenching tool, the military fold-up shovel—very handy. He approached one of the mounds and dug. He didn't have to dig long. "Fuck."

Eric took a step closer. "What?"

It was a corpse. It had blue skin and was desiccated. He had been a soldier, and what remained of his eyes looked skyward.

"Why does he look like that?"

"No blood in the body," Jonah said. "Come on, don't tell the girls about this either."

"No way."

They got what they needed at the aid station: sanitary wipes, aspirin, an IV, and a few saline bags for Daisy. Jonah had tried multiple phones while they were out, but there wasn't one connection. The phone at the aid station was no exception. It could have been out for days, maybe even weeks.

Jonah couldn't think of any other necessities. He could always come back; it wasn't far. Half the reason he had wanted to come to the aid station in the first place was just to make sure they could get inside and see how many supplies were left.

Jonah wasn't a medic, but he knew how to give an IV, except he'd never had to do it on the battlefield. When the class had been taught, he'd been teamed up with a soldier he'd only spoken to a few times. Trying to get that needle in his arm had resulted in a bloody mess.

The doc, a lieutenant everyone liked, had yelled at him, "Looks like a fucking massacre over here!"

It was probably the stress from where they were and lack of sleep from being in a war zone, but Jonah had started laughing, and he hadn't been able to keep the needle still. That had made the doc mad for real because what they were doing was dangerous. If the catheter broke off and got into the bloodstream, it could kill the person. Jonah had wanted to explain that it was his fault for making the joke, but you have to bite your tongue in the military. Jonah had tried again after the soldier generously offered his other arm. That time he'd gotten it right.

Jonah and Eric went back to the UV and drove it down to the barracks. Jonah took a load inside. Gil came out to help. After three trips they were

done. Everything they needed was placed in the dayroom, enough to survive for weeks.

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CHAPTER 12

Jonah went downstairs to the basement, a place he never suspected he'd see again. He'd gotten himself into trouble a few times, mostly because of his mouth, and had spent some hours buffing that floor on extra duty.

Jonah had been discharged from the military against his will, but there was a part of him that was relieved that he didn't have to go through most of daily military life anymore. He definitely didn't miss saluting assholes who thought they were better than everyone else because of the rank on their uniforms. On the other hand, he did miss the camaraderie.

He found the arms room open. The heavy padlock was lying on the floor next to the door, and the keys were inside. The weapons were gone, of course. The soldiers must have entered and left in a hurry, based on the disarray of the room. They had probably been attacked and had to mobilize quickly. Fortunately, there were still dozens of crates filled with loaded magazines. He put the padlock in his pocket and grabbed one of the crates.

Jonah walked into the dayroom and set the crate of ammo against the wall. His friends looked nervous. "It's just a precaution. There might be desperate people out there."

Eric had set up the IV. "How's this?"

"Good enough," Jonah said.

"I don't want to shoot any guns," Sharon said.

Eric got up, and Jonah took his place. "You won't have to," he said and carefully inserted the sixteen-gauge needle into Daisy's arm. He used his pointer finger to slide the catheter in snug. "She'll be good for a while."

The IV dripped fluids into Daisy's bloodstream.

"How many more of those do we have?" Sharon said.

"Plenty."

"If the soldiers didn't survive, how are we going to?" Danielle said.

"They're missing. Doesn't mean they're dead," Eric said.

"What do you think, Jonah?" Danielle said.

Her dismissal of Eric's comment clearly irritated him.

"We'll survive because we care about each other. Soldiers are ordered to go into battle. They find trouble, when we'll avoid it."

His friends hung on every word. They would do whatever he said.

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CHAPTER 13

A noise had woken Eric, but he wasn't sure what it was. It came from downstairs, and it sounded like a heavy step or something substantial toppling over onto a cushion. He peered around at his friends. They were all asleep.

The full moon was the only source of light, and it poured through the window. He grabbed one of the light sticks that Jonah called a chem light, the kind that glowed once it was bent in half that he'd seen at raves and that Jonah had used in the military, and he put it in his pocket.

Eric went outside, behind the barracks. It probably wasn't the best idea under the circumstances, but he just wanted a quick smoke. He pulled out his lighter and lit a cigarette; again, maybe not the best idea, but it was a nice night, and they had a view that overlooked the town. It was a great spot for a smoke, but it was strange to see a town without any lights.

Finishing the cigarette, he dropped it and stomped it out.

Eric went through the basement exit where he'd come out. He couldn't see well after being under the moonlight. His eyes must have adjusted. He removed the chem light from his pocket and bent it in half. It made a cracking sound, and then neon-blue light grew through it and glowed. He shook it, and it brightened even more. He held it up, giving him just enough light to see.

He heard something that made him stop. It sounded like a noise an animal would make, a kind of low rumble.

The creature that launched itself at him must have been waiting for him while he smoked. He'd probably passed by it on his way out. It wanted to knock him over. Eric stumbled, and the thing temporarily skittered out of view. Eric moved the chem light around him, trying to find it in the dimness. Then he saw it.

The creature rolled onto its stomach and leaped to its feet. It was about the size of a man, but it certainly wasn't one. It looked like what he had seen on the road before they crashed. It was hard to see, but it had sunken, bulbous eyes and large teeth that its lips had trouble stretching to accommodate. It must have been the Molter that the barracks artist had written about. He should have brought one of the guns.

It moved quickly, hunched over, steady and balanced as it did, ignoring Eric's thrashing and punching. The Molter got a hold of him and hugged itself close. Eric screamed for help, but the Molter rapidly covered his mouth with a pale hand. It sank its teeth into his neck, growling as it did. Eric let out a muffled scream. He couldn't move. The Molter was incredibly strong and wouldn't budge. Its teeth were embedded in his neck as if they were metal melded to metal.

"Where's Eric?" Jonah said.

No one knew. Everyone had woken up because of the commotion downstairs. Noises echoed easily down tile hallways, even from different floors. It was the age of the buildings.

"Stay here," he said, grabbing both automatic rifles. "Here," he said and handed one to Gil. "Make sure nothing happens to our girls."

"Don't worry," Gil said.

Gil flipped the safety switch to semiautomatic. Before bedtime Jonah had shown them all how to fire the weapon.

The blue chem light had blood on it, pitching a dark shadow over the Molter. It released its hold on Eric's body, and it crumpled awkwardly when it hit the tile floor. The fresh blood on the Molter's mouth steamed as it slowly moved toward the footsteps coming from the floor above.

Jonah stopped. One of the rooms was open. So was the window, the kind that swung open like a door, one they'd missed. It was a full moon. He reached out to shut the window but had to dodge backward. A Molter leaped up and crashed through the pane. Glass exploded into shards. Jonah turned his head, shielding his eyes.

The Molter fell two stories back to the ground. Jonah aimed down at it and fired. The quick three-round burst missed, and the Molter scurried into the darkness. Jonah backed away; there was no reason to close a window that had been destroyed. Jonah noticed a tree outside of the other window. The Molter had climbed it and leaped onto the side of the barracks. Jonah had no idea how it was holding on, and he didn't wait to find out.

As Jonah ran down the hallway, the sight of someone—really not someone, but something—made him stop short. The glimmer of moonlight shined on its head and glinted off its large teeth. The thing howled, and Jonah aimed down the hall and fired. It fell, but Jonah didn't have time to make sure it was dead.

The glass shattered behind him, and he felt the weight of the Molter when it landed inside the barracks. Jonah wheeled and fired again. He emptied the magazine into the creature as it tried to get a hand on him, teeth bared, but he killed it. There were more howls, and Jonah hurried to the dayroom.

"We need to get down to the arms room now!"

They'd all jumped when Jonah ran in. His friends had been sitting up on their cots, wide-eyed from the gunfire.

"What's going on?" Sharon said.

"No talking."

Using the sling attached to the automatic rifle, Jonah guided the weapon around his back and scooped Daisy up in his arms.

It occurred to him that the only other times he'd lifted her were when they'd slept together. He forced the thought out of his mind.

They all headed out into the hallway and down the stairs to the basement.

"Inside!" Jonah said.

His friends rushed past him into the arms room. Sharon was last.

"Shut the gate."

She did. He set Daisy on the ground and then slid his loaded automatic rifle to his front.

"Jonah," Sharon said quietly.

Jonah turned to see a Molter was standing outside the gate, silently peering inside, getting a look at everyone. It had probably gotten there moments after Sharon had shut the gate. A growl escaped its throat. Jonah thrust his weapon through the bars and fired, the rounds reverberating deafeningly through the room, and Gil put his fingers in his ears. The shots must have missed because the Molter bolted down the hallway.

Jonah reached through the gate and closed the padlock. It was awkward because the door was meant to lock from outside the room, while the person closing it was in the hallway, but he was trying to be fast. The Molter appeared again, clawing at Jonah's hands. No way it was getting in now. There was no sense wasting ammo, so Jonah shut the inside bulk door, silencing the Molter's snarling.

The Molter left about an hour later. Everyone was quiet. They had a kind of blank stare. Jonah suspected they were in shock, especially Danielle.

Tears had pushed mascara streaks down her cheeks. "We can't go try to find him?"

"We can't open the door," Jonah said. "Can't jeopardize all of you."

Jonah didn't think it was necessary to tell her that Eric was probably dead. Deep down, she knew.

"You mean for my boyfriend and your best friend?!" Danielle shouted, continuing to sob.

Sharon hugged her close. "I think we should leave."

"It could be worse out there," Jonah said immediately.

"Yeah, could be," Sharon said. "We don't know for sure, though."

Jonah could feel the predictable behavior coming; it was especially common with civilians, green ones at that. It wasn't their fault they would act like toddlers during a time like this. That's what they were, figuratively speaking. They were new at experiencing a crisis. Better for them that they didn't know how to behave during such an arduous time. The more traumas they experienced, the more bites would be taken out of the soul, pieces that could never be put back.

"Right, but is it worth risking everyone's lives for a place that doesn't have weapons, water, or food, and that isn't a military base that I know like the back of my hand?"

"You think you know everything."

Jonah didn't address Sharon's last statement. He let it hang in the air. He didn't want the argument to escalate. It was perfectly normal for people to

direct their anger and blame those who took charge. Sharon hadn't done so yet, but it was coming. Someone must be accountable, even if she had feelings for that someone.

Danielle was resting her head in Sharon's lap on the floor, asleep. Daisy was on a cot Jonah had set up, and Gil slept next to it.

"What do you think it is?" Sharon said.

Jonah shook his head.

"Could it have come from here?"

"This base?"

"No . . . Earth."

"Don't know."

"A lab?"

"No idea. It doesn't matter."

"How can it not matter?"

"We just have to focus on avoiding them. That's how!" Jonah said, mistakenly raising his voice.

"How long can we stay here?!" she said, equaling his volume.

His sleeping friends stirred.

"Days. Months if we have to," Jonah said, gentling his tone.

Sharon had mentally prepared herself not to fight with Jonah, but it was happening anyway, and she couldn't stop herself. She hadn't known the situation was going to be so dire.

She had started her period. Jonah hadn't realized it yet and overlooked what he normally knew because of present circumstances. No point in explaining—he could take it, and he should know by now anyway, considering how close they were. If it ever came up, she'd explain later. "You really think we can last months with those creatures out there?"

"Yes, if we're smart. Cautious . . . And watch out for each other."

"More cautious than today, you mean?"

Jonah let what she said flare into anger in his mind and then let it dissipate. "Please don't fight with me."

"How am I fighting with you?"

"Just don't. Not now."

Fight with me on the way home.

"Whatever."

Ah, the woman's "Fuck you." Jonah exhaled and closed his eyes.

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CHAPTER 14

There was no way to tell what time it was from inside the arms room. It was like a bunker. Jonah checked his watch: 7:42 a.m. All looked as he carefully opened the door. Gil aimed an automatic rifle.

"It's clear," Jonah said. He stepped into the hallway and shut the bar door behind him. "Lock up until I get back."

Gil nodded and closed the bulk door.

Jonah headed through the barracks and then outside. Mentally, he was reverting back to a military frame of mind—it was like muscle memory; you never lose it. Gears that were created while in a war zone had been dormant since then. But now they were turning. One minute you cared for your friend, the next you were scanning him or her for weaknesses, trying to identify traits that could slow you down, get you killed, or get others killed. It scared him a little to know that his subconscious knew something his conscious mind didn't. He knew they weren't presently in danger, but the primitive part of his mind was triggering changes as if it knew danger was coming.

After exploring the base, he realized they were safe for now.

Jonah ran up to the dayroom and grabbed water and a box of MREs. Carried together, they were heavier than he'd anticipated, and he broke a sweat carrying them downstairs. He banged his foot against the arms room door.

"Who is it?" Gil said from inside, muffled.

"It's me, open up."

"Me who?"

The door opened.

"Funny," Jonah said.

"So?" Gil said.

"I think they only come at night."

"Let me help you," Sharon said.

She took the box of MREs off the top of the water, and they both set them against the wall. Whatever irritation she showed last night was gone, reaffirming what Jonah had heard many times: it's good to sleep on it.

"We'll stay in here until I'm confident that's the case," Jonah said. "And we'll sleep in here from now on. OK?"

All of them nodded.

"Who's hungry?"

"Is that army food?" Gil said.

"Yep. Meal ready to eat."

"I'm not," Danielle said.

"I am. You need to eat," Sharon said.

Danielle shook her head.

"Gil?" Jonah said.

"I'm always hungry."

They each selected an MRE, and Jonah showed them how the MREs were cooked. It was simple; you just added water to the MRE heater and then put the plastic-covered food in at an angle. About ten minutes later, you had a hot meal.

Jonah added the small bottle of hot sauce that came with each MRE to his spaghetti, something he'd done hundreds of times. For dessert they had pudding—a dessert mixed from a little of each of the MREs' contents—coffee creamer, sugar, and a little water stirred together in a hot-cocoa packet.

Jonah drove a UV up to the aid station. He wanted a better look at one of those bodies.

He didn't have to dig long before he found a corpse. It was another soldier. His skin was shriveled, emaciated. One of those Molters had sucked him dry.

The Molters had buried the evidence. This was probably instinct, so the others wouldn't get spooked and leave their hunting ground, ensuring a food source even after the hunting began. He wondered if they got bigger.

There was something else that bothered him, which was the way they attacked. The creature drained its prey of all its blood, as if it were storing up food for the winter. He was sure the attack on Daisy was related, but he wasn't sure how. There were mounds all over the base and hundreds at the hospital. He dug up another mound.

It was Eric, and he felt tears warm his eyes. He wiped them away and gagged. He covered him up quickly and tried to clear his mind. Now wasn't the time to dwell, to be angry, or to be sad. It wouldn't be beneficial for anyone, including the dead—even for someone he'd known a long time. If Eric saw him standing over his corpse shedding tears, he'd probably sneak up behind him and call him a pussy. Jonah smiled.

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CHAPTER 15

The idea of sleep was amusing because it was next to impossible. The Molters were howling again. They were inside the barracks. Jonah would have to secure the doors before bedtime in the morning. He had meant to board up the broken window, but he hadn't. They'd probably stay all night.

The Molters could be heard scampering down the halls, coordinating with one another and jumping. It was humorous in a way. They sounded like out-of-control children.

"This is the worst vacation ever," Danielle said.

She was right; it was. Her comment struck Jonah as funny, and he laughed. He laughed harder than he had in a long time—in years. It was one of the few times he'd let himself lose his composure since the trouble had begun. It was only laughing, but it wasn't appropriate. However, he couldn't stop himself. He almost wished the others would join in with him, but they didn't. They seemed horrified by it.

It was his fault. He'd let himself get backlogged. Emotion had to be let out at some point. It was a pressure valve that needed to be opened, if only to have the space to fill back up again. There were all kinds of ways to do that, and everyone did it differently. Some talked it out, fucked, fought, exercised, or jumped from a plane.

The last time he'd allowed himself to weep was after he'd returned from the war. He'd lost a friend, and he had kept his feelings about it bottled up until they got back. During the traditional formation, the first sergeant had called out his friend's name three times. His friend would never respond, and Jonah saw the sorrow in the first sergeant's eyes, saw how he felt responsible for his death. Jonah felt the therapeutic sting of tears and felt emotion ripple through the formation of soldiers as each took his patient turn at saying good-bye by saluting his weapon, boots, and dog tags.

Jonah knew from experience that it was best to stay levelheaded during a crisis. Allowing your emotions to control you could lead to dangerous decisions, ones that endangered those you cared about or even loved. Jonah had to resist the overwhelming urge to go out at night and avenge his best friend's death by hunting down and killing every Molter he could find. But because he barely knew anything about the creatures, he would probably get himself killed, and that would leave the women and Gil vulnerable.

He hated that their trip had turned into what it had; that his friends—who were normal and innocent—were experiencing something ugly. It forced them all to become different people, strangers, and he hated having to be strong for everyone.

In spite of that, it was what he had to do. In his mind he stopped venting, and then he stopped laughing and caught his breath.

He regained his composure and went back to the person he had to be, whom his friends needed him to be.

“Daisy’s going to die, isn’t she?” Sharon said without looking at Jonah.

“Of course not,” Jonah said with as much confidence as he could muster.

“How do you know? You don’t even know what’s wrong with her.”

“I’m not going to let anything happen to her. To any of you.”

“From now on, you mean?”

“What?”

“From now on. Eric’s already dead.”

“We don’t know that.”

She shook her head and leaned it back against the wall. “It sounds like they’re signaling each other,” she said. “This is all your fault . . .”

Jonah said nothing.

“I know you can hear me! We wouldn’t even be here if it weren’t for you! Each one of us is here to suit one of your needs. I take care of you. Eric challenged you before he died,” she said, letting that one resonate. “Daisy’s your whore.”

“Sharon,” Gil said.

“Shut up!”

Gil reddened as if she’d slapped him.

“Gil worships you. Danielle’s your new girl.”

Jonah saw Danielle looking away from them. “I lived through some stuff I shouldn’t have. I told myself that once I got out I would live the rest of my life exactly the way I wanted. That I’d do all the things I’d ever wanted to. I just wanted all of us to have a good time. This isn’t my fault.”

“So, you’re having a good time, then?” Sharon said, tears changing the pitch of her voice before she turned away.

It was hard for Jonah to control himself around her. They’d always had a connection and always would. Moreover, he’d always been attracted to her, even when he was angry, as he was now. He wanted to hold her, to give her soft kisses and tell her that everything was going to be all right and that they were going to make it out safe or that he was going to die trying.

He also wanted to grab her by the shoulders, yell in her face, and explain how the only reason she was still alive was because of him.

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It was morning.

Jonah put his arms through the 9mm holster. “I’m going to the hospital for more IVs.”

“There aren’t any more at the aid station?” Sharon said.

“Not many.”

“We should all go,” she said, eyeing him, her voice rising.

“No. Better to risk one life than all.”

“Bullshit! You’re going to leave us! I don’t know which is worse—you, or those creatures!”

“What?”

“You heard me!”

“I was hoping I heard you wrong . . . How could you say that?”

Jonah realized she was close to breaking.

“You both use those around you to suit your own needs. What’s the difference between you and them, Jonah? Absolutely nothing that I can see. We should all leave . . . It’s too late!”

Jonah checked the fuel gauge. There was plenty, almost a full tank. He started the UV and pulled onto the main barracks loop.

How could she compare him to such a thing? When they got home, he expected an apology. He’d be sure to explain to her that it only took so many words for someone to turn his back on another person. She should be thanking him, kissing his ass, sucking his dick!

They’d be dead if he weren’t there. Although she was right about one thing: they were there because of him. In all reality, it was his fault. If he hadn’t asked them to come . . .

“No!”

The sound of his own voice suddenly made his random, overlapping, jagged, and out-of-focus thoughts aligned and clear. He was losing focus.

“Bad road.”

He drove past the guard shack, then onto the main road. He looked over at the loaded automatic rifle on the passenger seat.

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CHAPTER 17

Jonah broke the glass to one of the hospital windows. If the Molters hunted during the day, they would have attacked already.

The hospital was like the headquarters building on the base—completely normal on the outside, but in complete disarray and filled with the stench of death on the inside. He didn't see any of the flesh piles, but he could smell them rotting from rooms out of view, and he sure as hell wasn't going to go check to make sure.

He headed straight for the supply room. He remembered where it was because he'd been to this hospital multiple times to visit a friend who'd been injured during the war.

He piled as many IV bags in his arms as he could carry, thought better of it, and emptied a milk crate he spotted under the receptionist's desk. He loaded up twice as many as he'd been able to carry initially—plenty for Daisy and anyone else who decided to mysteriously fall unconscious. There were still a few dozen or so bags at the aid station on base, but he'd only use them as a last resort, in case a longer trip wasn't possible. He would gather from an outside supply as long as they were available.

On his way back, Jonah stopped on the road, toying with ideas. The vehicle had plenty of fuel, and it was no coincidence that he'd picked the one that had extra fuel cans strapped to the side.

It pissed him off that Sharon could turn on him the way she had. The tension between them would only get worse. He knew her better than anyone. She was closer to him than anyone on the planet, so the fact that she would detest him the way she did—someone whom she loved—made his decision that much easier.

He knew he'd end up alone anyway and would only delay the inevitable by carrying his friends along. Their weakness and inexperience would get them killed eventually. He would survive; he always had. At one time he had been like them: inexperienced in a chaotic environment. Except it felt like he'd been that way a long time ago.

It saddened him that he was forced to leave them behind. He could make it a few towns over. Even in a time of crisis, trains might still be dependable . . .

No, stop it!

He started the vehicle and hit the gas. He was becoming a victim of his own desperation. It was irrational thinking and shameful. He shot past an abandoned roadster, one that could take advantage of the unlimited speeds on the autobahn. It was a bright, fiery red, the kind that attracted women and the police in America.

Jonah accelerated around a corner. The rumble of the engine reverberated off the chiseled mountains on both sides of the highway.

A vehicle appeared in his view, and Jonah took his foot off the accelerator. The vehicle shifted down accordingly. He saw someone beside the vehicle. A

man, another person! “Oh, hell yeah!”

Hood up, the truck was parked on the oncoming side of traffic. It was a new model of American truck, one of the big ones, and it towed a trailer. Someone who knew what was going on, Jonah thought hopefully.

Jonah pulled over and stopped. The man turned and eyed him carefully, which was obvious even under his large sunglasses. He was tall and heavyset, with a full, thick beard.

Jonah hopped out and held up a friendly hand. “*Entschuldigen Sie, bitte*.”

The man only stared back at him as Jonah approached.

“Do you speak English?”

“I’m American, same as you,” the man said.

“What are you doing here?”

The man took off his sunglasses. “Wrong place, wrong time.”

Jonah noticed the small arsenal the man was towing behind his truck. There was a high-caliber sniper rifle, a semiautomatic shotgun of some kind he recognized but whose make he wasn’t sure about, two Russian assault rifles, and crates that were probably full of grenades. He also had an automatic rifle decked out with rails for all kinds of attachments and scopes. There were more weapons under the tarp, but Jonah couldn’t see what kind they were.

“Can you help me? Me and my friends—”

The man pulled an automatic pistol from his waistband. “That’s far enough.”

He shot in Jonah’s direction. The round kicked up dirt and echoed through the nearby mountains. Jonah froze and put his hands up.

“Keep those hands up,” he said, noticing Jonah’s 9mm jostling at his side.

“That isn’t necessary, sir.”

“Yes, it is. You could become one, like the others I stopped to help.”

“Become one?”

The man laughed and rolled his eyes. “I saw a man turn into one of them right before my eyes.”

Jonah swallowed, letting the info sink in. He hoped the man was mistaken and that it wasn’t possible. He had to get back to his friends quickly. “But not during the day.”

“No . . . I guess not.”

“I’m healthy.”

“How do you know?”

“I just do.”

“It’s more complicated than that. If you slept last night, you could turn.”

“You didn’t sleep last night?” Jonah said.

“Like I said. Complicated.”

“Do you have a satellite phone?”

“No.”

“Need help with your truck?”

“It’s fixed,” he said, slamming the hood.

Jonah lowered his hands. “Sir, do you know what’s happening?”

The man stopped, studying Jonah. He exhaled. “It isn’t just here.”

“How far have you been?”

“Paris.”

“What’s happening in Paris?”

“Same as here. Worse, actually.”

“How could it be worse?”

“More people than those creatures. That’s how. I can’t decide which species I prefer.” The man forced a smile, put the pistol back in his waistband, and got in his truck. “Days have been shorter for this time of year. Nights have been colder. Haven’t seen any animals in the area, not one, yet I always feel like I’m being watched.”

“Do you know what they are?”

“The bloodsuckers are minions. They feed until they can’t feed anymore, then they join their leader. They turn into cocoons, and their insides liquefy, then the leader actually drinks them!” He shook his head in disgust. “Wherever you are, there is at least one nearby.”

Whoever wrote “BEHEMOTH” on the barracks was probably referring to the leader the man spoke of.

“How close?” Jonah said.

“I’ve seen them within ten miles of one another. Do you have access to a high-caliber weapon?”

“Yes.”

“Kill it, and you can reside in that area temporarily.”

The truck started. The man pressed the accelerator, revving the motor as if he were about to enter a race.

“But if you leave, you’ll run into another one, then another.”

“How many have you killed?”

“Thirty-one. Take root in just about every town.”

“Where are they?”

“Always in a dark place. Always hard to find.”

Jonah felt his heart sink. Whoever had written, “BEHEMOTH SPOTTED I” on the barracks had been interrupted. Most likely the writer had meant it to read, “BEHEMOTH SPOTTED IN . . .,” and Jonah knew exactly how the warning was meant to end.

The man looked off into the distance. His eyes were glazed, as if he was remembering something terrible.

“How far are you going?” Jonah said.

“As far as possible, to kill as many as I’m able. Good luck.”

The truck threw gravel as it peeled onto the main road. Jonah could feel the power of the truck’s large engine through his feet, and he watched it disappear down the road.

He could have followed the man; that was the smart thing to do. If the man made it this far, he’d surely make it a lot farther. He recognized the survival

instinct creeping in—the need to save his own skin but also his clear sense of a predicament. It wasn't that he didn't care about his friends; he did, he loved them, but as he'd had to do in the past, he wasn't allowing himself to feel.

The only way to save them was to ignore the soldier that the military had created, the one who ignored his own needs to accomplish the mission. He must not think of them as collateral damage or rationalize—instead, he had to do the right thing, always the most difficult decision.

He wanted a drink, to get drunk, to get fucking wasted. That would be the sure-as-shit way to forget his problems for a while. Of course it would also be the sure-as-shit way to doom his friends. He thought of Sharon and how she always smiled at him the same way, even when she was mad at him, and of the way she liked to hold him after sex, even when he complained about being too hot.

He realized he could become just like that man in the truck. He would survive. He was sure of it. However, to live alone is not to live at all. In battle and even life and love, one is none.

Jonah got back into the vehicle and turned the ignition. Nothing happened. He tried again, but it wouldn't turn over. "You've gotta be fucking kidding me."

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CHAPTER 18

"Something's wrong with Daisy," Danielle said.

Sharon walked over to her cot. "What?"

Gil snapped awake from a nap and was almost instantly on his feet. He went over to where the women were.

Danielle explained that she'd been braiding Daisy's hair. She wanted to surprise her when she woke up. As she was braiding, Daisy had turned pale, almost blue.

"She's breathing OK," Sharon said.

"She looks puffy," Gil said.

"She doesn't look . . ."

All tried to think of what could be wrong with her.

"Jonah should be back soon," Gil said. "He'll know what to do."

Sharon rolled her eyes. "He always does."

Jonah had been frantic for about a half hour, trying to think back to all of the ways to fix a UV, which were many. They broke down all the time. He tried reconnecting cables; checking fluids that he already knew were full; and basically going down the list of everything he remembered from his daily preventative maintenance, checks, and services list. Nothing worked until he discovered a dead battery. He would never have thought to bring a spare; batteries are good for years.

He remembered the roadster he'd passed about five miles back. It would be getting dark soon. He'd have to hurry. When he was in the military, he'd been able to run about six-minute miles, except he didn't run consistently anymore, so he'd have to push himself. This meant about thirty minutes. He took the automatic rifle, grabbed a bottle of water, and ran.

"Gil?" Daisy said.

"She's awake!" Danielle shouted.

Sharon and Gil had been talking in the hallway, and they rushed in. She was sitting up next to Danielle.

"Daisy!" Sharon said, siding up next to her.

Daisy reached out and held Gil's hand. "Gil."

Gil smiled. "Oh, Daisy. I was so worried."

"I don't feel well," she said.

"Can you tell us what's wrong?" Danielle said.

"I can't see," she said quietly.

Daisy's flesh was still the mysterious blue color. She seemed weak and

swayed slightly, as if the simple act of sitting up were zapping her strength.

"I'm blind. Gil?"

"What is it, sweetie?" he said, holding her hand.

She grimaced in pain, showing large teeth.

Danielle stood. "Oh my . . ."

Daisy started dry-heaving then, but nothing came up. It made sense. There was nothing substantial that could have come up; she'd only had IVs since the crash. She looked in Gil's direction.

"What's wrong?" Gil said. He turned to Sharon. "What's wrong with her?"

"I don't know," Sharon said.

Daisy's eyes rolled back, and she fell backward onto her pillow, as if her brain had been disconnected and plucked out of her skull. There was a tearing sound, and a line of blood formed down the middle of her face. It quickly turned into running globules that wet her cheeks and ran into her hair. It was almost as if her heart had sped up and was trying to expel all of her blood out of her body as quickly as possible.

Her skin split then. Danielle and Sharon backed away.

"Get away from it!" Sharon yelled.

"But it's Daisy!" Gil said.

Moments later, they witnessed a creature form out of someone who was once their friend. The Molter grabbed handfuls of Daisy's flesh and violently tugged at it. Strands of bloody flesh stretched until they snapped, and then it pulled what remained of Daisy off itself. Her skin splattered thickly as it hit the carpet. It had used Daisy to create itself, to mutate. It had stretched and pulled, molding her bones, organs, and every molecule into what it needed so as to become what it was.

It stood shakily onto its feet, like a newborn. Sharon thought it looked remarkably similar to a human in shape. She remembered their confusion about what they had seen right before the accident on the road. Except this wasn't a human at all. Its skin was white, deep, and corrugated. Its skull was pronounced and square. It was strong, with no hint of the gorgeous woman it was born from.

Its mouth hung open, with lips that could barely hold its large, sharp teeth. It had small white eyes that were sunken beneath a pronounced brow. A large tongue stuck out and tasted the air, as if its eyes were useless, even though it had them.

"Run," Sharon said as she and Danielle slowly backed toward the hallway.

Gil didn't move.

"Gil, run!"

Reality hit, and all three ran out into the hallway. They didn't get far. The Molter got its grip into Sharon's arm.

She wished Jonah were there.

It was dark, and Molters had been periodically appearing and chasing the roadster, but they couldn't keep up with it. It hugged the road securely as Jonah sped toward the barracks as fast as he could.

The sleek vehicle had been locked when he'd first come to it. It looked like it had just been washed. Luckily, he saw that the keys were in the ignition. He couldn't understand why someone would abandon a vehicle but lock the doors —probably out of habit.

It was unquestionably an exquisite piece of machinery, but it didn't take Jonah long to decide to break a window. He'd chosen the one on the passenger side. The car started up immediately, and he noticed it still had nearly a half a tank of gas.

Molters appeared in front of him, but his bumper finished them off easily. One slammed its arm against the rear window as he passed, and the glass spider-webbed immediately. A few were smart and jumped from the trees, but most missed. One landed on the roof, but the sheer speed of the car was too fast, and it fell off the back. Jonah snickered.

Then one got extremely lucky. It somehow landed on the hood and hung on. It crawled its way to the driver's side, using the mirror to hold onto. Jonah was glad it didn't notice the broken window that it could have crawled into on the passenger side.

He aimed his 9mm and calmly pushed the button to the window. It lowered with an expensive purr. The thing lurched forward with its jaws stretched open, and Jonah fired five shots into its face before it fell off the car, the muzzle flashes igniting the darkness.

Gil knew the Molter was moments away from finding him. He'd run and hid after he'd seen what it did to the girls. Poor Sharon; her screams had been awful. Danielle had tried to help—to get the thing off of Sharon—except that while it drained Sharon of blood, it grabbed her too. Danielle struggled and yelled for Gil, yanking against the Molter's iron grip to no avail. When it was finished with Sharon, it buried its face into Danielle's neck.

Gil had run far before hiding under the staircase, but he could still hear Danielle. He had no idea a woman could scream so loudly. The Molter was coming, and there was nothing he could do to stop it. He tried desperately to think of thoughts that would stop him from taking his breath in quick gasps, thoughts that wouldn't give him away. He tried to think of the way things were before the trip, except he kept remembering Daisy's skin splitting. He couldn't get the gruesome sight out of his mind. He was going to pass out, and he felt twice as heavy as he actually was, as if liquid steel coursed through his veins instead of blood. He held his breath.

Before the Molter got a hold of him with its powerful grasp, he could have

sworn it said his name in a grumbly tone. He was surprised by its strength, the kind no human was capable of, especially because it was smaller than he was. It reminded him of the stories he'd heard of how strong apes were. This thing had to be even stronger.

As it plunged its teeth into his neck, Gil heard a vehicle. Maybe it was Jonah. It didn't matter anymore. He didn't care if he lived. He would never be with Daisy. Well, not in the way he spent years fantasizing about. It was fitting to him that the creature that was once her was the one that was going to kill him, and it saddened him that it would be the closest he'd ever be to her.

Night had come quickly. The Molters often didn't show until a few hours after nightfall, and Jonah felt hope until he got inside the barracks. The Molter had Gil in its arms. Upon seeing Jonah, it withdrew its teeth from Gil's neck. The mouth suction popped off sickeningly. The Molter growled, a deep grumble. It drooled blood, glared coldly, and then let Gil's drained body drop. It took small steps, trying to sneak up on Jonah. He raised his automatic rifle and fired the entire magazine into the Molter until it fell dead.

The weapon fire attracted more Molters. He heard them running outside, trying to find a way in and scampering over the rooftops. Jonah would have to take care of his friends' remains in the morning.

He easily made it to the arms room. No other Molters had found their way in by the time he made it downstairs. He locked the door for the night.

Jonah didn't sleep well. The Molters eventually found their way inside. The scuffling, growling, and howling of them outside the door angered him and made it difficult to close his eyes.

Everything he'd feared would happen had happened. The fact that he came back for his friends was for nothing. He should have never left. His friends were dead, and it was his fault. He had briefly considered abandoning them earlier. He might as well have.

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CHAPTER 19

Jonah took a step into the hallway at 7:30 a.m. Once the sun was up, he was safe. He was dreading what he had to do, which was why he'd motivated himself to start as early as possible. He'd wrapped Sharon, Danielle, and Gil's bodies in bedsheets and loaded them into the UV. Molters hadn't had the chance to bury them.

He found what must have been Daisy, though it was hard to tell. The only definitive way was from her clothing. The rest was just flesh, broken bones, and blood—like the flesh piles he'd seen in the headquarters building. He put her remains in a bedsheet too.

He used the entrenching tool to dig graves next to where he'd found Eric's body. He'd taken his time, and after a few hours his friends were in the ground.

The Molter he'd killed must have come out of Daisy. It was smaller than the others he'd seen. Maybe size was relative to what it scraped its nutrients from. If one were born from a man who was seven feet tall, would the Molter be close to that height?

Most people were sucked dry. Why some were picked to become Molters and some weren't, Jonah could only guess. Maybe it was random, or maybe it had to do with their genetic integrity. What he did know was that there were Molters, leaders he hadn't seen—according to the man on the road—and ones that seemed to be able to infect others and make more. He'd never seen one, but Eric had. He said there'd been a small animal on Daisy. Maybe the one that had infected her was born from a small animal.

What was happening in the rest of the world? How many more Molters were there? How far had they spread? There were too many questions about them. He wished he knew the answers.

He thought of his family. He hadn't talked to his parents in weeks. He had an older brother and two younger sisters . . . and they had children.

Jonah wasn't sure how he was going to wipe out all of the Molters on the base, but he was going to try his best to do just that. He could hunt during the day; they only seemed to come out at night, and he knew where they were coming from . . . where he'd dreaded going.

Jonah looked up at the words painted on the side of the barracks: MOLTERS ATTACKED 9/18 BEHEMOTH SPOTTED I.

"In tunnel," he finished.

Constructed under the base, the tunnels had multiple tasks during the war,

including hiding gold and other treasures stolen from citizens, weapons, equipment, or even soldiers. The tunnels were even used for secret technology and experiments.

When Jonah had been stationed there, the entrances to the tunnels were padlocked shut. Now they were wide open. This should have jogged his memory earlier, and guilt flooded him. They shouldn't have stayed. Then again, according to the man on the road, the creatures were everywhere, in every town.

He parked a UV at the entrance to one of the tunnels. He tied five-fifty cord to the bumper and then to his belt. He had taped a flashlight to the end of his automatic rifle. As Jonah headed inside, light splashed through the darkness, illuminating enough space in front of him to navigate the old war relic.

The tunnels stretched the entire length of the base, with crisscrossing paths. Jonah wouldn't get lost as long as he kept hold of the cord. He didn't have to go far.

He found the first cocoon almost immediately. The Molters hung by their feet using a sticky residue, like amber. They were clearly dead, and their skin was a leathery shell and slightly transparent. He could see their innards breaking down and slowly liquefying, like an ice cube set out on hot pavement. He needed a ladder to reach them.

From deep in the tunnel, something bellowed. It wasn't a Molter; he was sure of it. It was something bigger—probably the thing the man on the road had described.

It was particularly annoying that there was no ladder in the barracks he was staying in or in the first two that he'd checked. Then Jonah remembered the headquarters building. The ladders had probably been taken there, and the soldiers who had used them were no longer alive, which was why they weren't returned to the barracks they were taken from. Fortunately, he did find one ladder in the broom closet on the first floor of Charlie battery. He'd have to work fast. It would be night soon.

Back at the tunnel, he climbed up the ladder and forced a paint scraper deep into the residue. He took a small hammer and pounded the end of it, and the cocoon fell. Then he climbed up to the next one. He'd only need a few more.

He tied the cocoons together with the five-fifty cord that was attached to his belt. Whatever was deep in the tunnel bellowed again, this time rumbling the walls as if it knew Jonah was there. He felt the air shift, and he could tell something was moving toward him.

He shined his flashlight, its brightness eating up the darkness before it. It flashed over something, but the thing was far away. The fact that the light picked up on it from his distance showed how large it actually was. No time to investigate. Jonah knew his curiosity might get him killed. There was no fighting room in the tunnels, and he wasn't familiar enough with their layout,

so he headed for the entrance.

He dragged the three cocoons out of the tunnel. There wasn't much time. Night was coming. His preparations had taken him longer than expected, and he had a lot more to do. Jonah had been lucky in his assumption that the Molters were nocturnal. He slashed one of the cocoons with a knife, and as its gooey contents spilled out; the cocoon collapsed and deflated like a balloon.

Jonah saw that a fully automatic grenade launcher was inoperable under the vehicle that had been flipped over. This was disappointing. It was an astoundingly destructive weapon system, and he'd used one on a few occasions during the war. The squad automatic rifle would have to do. He'd called it "SAR" for short.

The UVs still had a multitude of weapon choices. There were three rocket launchers, night-vision goggles—he'd take a pair, which he probably wouldn't need, but if he did, he'd just have to remember to take them off before firing a weapon—and plenty of ammo, including tracer rounds. Perfect.

He investigated another vehicle and hit the jackpot: two mine bandoleers, never set to blow. There had probably been more, but they were no doubt used outside the headquarters building, considering the damage.

He found a crate of incendiary grenades and decided to save them for another battle. He was hopeful there would be one. He'd have to be careful, though; he'd seen these grenades explode, and it was an easy way to get trapped and burn to death.

Finding weapons wasn't what concerned him. The problem was that he was going to have to fight on his own, which he'd barely trained for. He had only been in the military for a few years, not enough time to cover every aspect of training. Going into battle was bearable, at minimum, if you had your buddies.

Jonah figured his best plan of action would be to lead the creature on as long of a path as possible and do his best to kill it along the way. It seemed like a good plan.

He loaded all the weapons into the vehicle, drove it across the physical-training field, parked in front of the mailroom, and unloaded the weapons inside, except for the SAR, which he kept at the gunner's hatch.

He went out and climbed up the gunner's hatch and aimed the SAR across the field toward the road. There were two ammo boxes filled with four hundred rounds each. He pulled the cocking handle to the rear, lifted the cover, inserted the ammo belt from the box, closed the cover, pulled the trigger, and eased the bolt forward to the firing position—locked, cocked, and ready to rock.

He pushed the legs of both mines into the soft grass next to the front and rear tires of the UV. He knew he had a safe distance of about twenty meters

for the back blast, so he grabbed two sets of firing-wire spools and attached them to the mines. Then he trailed both sets into the mailroom, where he attached their firing devices.

He was going to keep his automatic rifle there. He wouldn't need it unless he made it back. In fact, there were points along his plan of attack where he'd only have a knife on him due to the fact that he needed to stay light and mobile. It wasn't often that a soldier went into battle so ill-equipped.

Jonah grabbed all three rocket launchers and started jogging. He dropped one in the middle of the field, dropped another halfway down the main road, and slung the last one over his shoulder. Each launcher had one rocket.

Jonah sank his knife into one of the cocoons and dragged it from the opening to the Nazi tunnel to the inside hallway of the barracks, the contents of it spilling along the way, leaving a thick, gelatinous trail.

Jonah sat on a bench in front of the barracks, smoking a cigarette from one of the packs Eric had bought him when they were all at the club. Eric had known he didn't care for the brand, so he'd bought it to mess with him. Jonah smiled.

Then his smile faded. His friend was gone. All of the people he was close to were dead because of those creatures. Jonah checked his watch. It was about an hour until sundown.

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CHAPTER 20

Jonah was across from the Alpha battery barracks, just to the side of the tunnel's exit. Camouflage paint covered his face, and he'd pulled tree brush around and over his position.

He'd showered after the smoke; it was a cold one that came out in a trickle. He didn't use any soap. He didn't know how well—or even if—those things could smell, but he didn't want to give away his position because he couldn't resist a butt before battle.

He wore earplugs in case he didn't die. His ears already rang. It was hardly noticeable when out in the world, but if he was in a quiet room, it sounded like the constant buzz of a mosquito. He remembered asking a doctor in the military if there were anything that could be done about it. The doctor had said to turn a fan on to drown out the ringing in his ears.

He sensed something was coming, the way you know when there's someone in a room with you even if you haven't spotted him yet. From the exit to the tunnel, legs appeared, all squashed together like a spider's, waiting as if testing whether it was safe to come out.

Jonah raised the rocket launcher and aimed it at the barracks, waiting for the creature to cross his line of fire. His heart raced, and he hoped he didn't die, but if he did, he hoped to take it with him.

The Behemoth squeezed itself out of the tunnel. All of it. Jonah gasped. It was much larger than he thought it would be, or imagined it could be. It was probably close to thirty feet high. It had many legs that always seemed to be moving, propelling its body forward. Its black frame was centered around its gruesome head, which was remarkably similar to that of the other Molters, just a lot bigger. It had dark stripes that reached like fingers toward the center of its face, in contrast to the rest of its head, which was white.

Luckily, it didn't see Jonah and slowly glided across the street, following the slick trail of its food. When it was in front of the barracks, Jonah pressed down on the rocket launcher's trigger.

The Behemoth flittered backward, and the rocket smashed into the front door of the barracks, blowing it apart. The explosion echoed through the quiet night. At first the Behemoth didn't move, shocked at the power of the weapon. Then it suddenly whipped its head in Jonah's direction. He could see it bare its large teeth at him. Jonah ran. The Behemoth let out a low hiss, like an engine revving up for speed, and went after him.

Jonah had hoped that it would have been hit, killed, or at least disoriented from the rocket. Its surprise was only momentary. It was too fast for Jonah, and he was barely able to escape from being scooped up into its many legs.

Jonah grabbed the second rocket launcher, the one he'd planted in case the first one didn't work; spun; and fired. The rocket hit it center mass, and the concussion blew Jonah backward. He landed on his back, stunned. The impact knocked the earplugs out, and his ears rang.

The rocket didn't kill the Behemoth, but it was hobbled. It limped across the road to the steep incline of a dirt wall on the opposite side.

Jonah regained his bearings. He got up and ran again. The Behemoth howled at his movement, angry with the human who had wounded it. Jonah had a lead this time. He was halfway across the field. He grabbed the last rocket launcher and aimed, finger ready to depress the trigger, but the monster was nowhere in sight.

"Shit."

Minutes passed, long enough for Jonah to realize that the rocket blast had done some serious damage. Jonah noticed his lower back didn't feel quite right—like it had stretched or bent the wrong way. Then he saw movement out of the corner of his eye, and he turned to his right.

The tree branches were moving, but there was no wind. Wait, not the tree branches—the Behemoth jumped from the tree and landed in the field, an astonishing leap, and the ground shook. Jonah fired. This time the Behemoth anticipated it and dodged. The rocket didn't even come close. It streaked through the sky, and when Jonah finally took his eyes off it, it exploded somewhere behind the trees.

Jonah made it to his final defense and leapt on top of the UV. The Behemoth scampered toward him with jaws open, ready to attack. Jonah fired the SAR, pelting it with 6mm ammunition at fourteen rounds per second.

The Behemoth's limbs were coming off. Still, it struggled onward, moving on stumps that were once complete legs. Jonah knew he could fire the weapon for only so long. The barrel would have to be changed out, and there was no way he had the time, so he kept firing until the entire box of ammo was spent, the Behemoth absorbing most of the bullets. It would die eventually from its wounds, but it could kill Jonah easily before it did.

Jonah's finger came off the trigger; a steady stream of smoke came out of the barrel. He jumped off the vehicle and ran inside the mailroom. The Behemoth let out a howl of victory and accelerated toward the building. Jonah grabbed both firing devices and clicked each three times.

Outside, the mines blew right in front of the Behemoth. Because they were positioned at the ends of the UV, the detonated composition also sent shards of metal with the steel pellets from the plastic matrixes. The Behemoth was shredded, reduced to chunks and mist, intertwined with the smoke from the blast.

The explosion echoed across the base, even reaching town.

Then all was quiet, the kind of silence that was only possible at night.

Jonah came out aiming his automatic rifle, and he saw them. Molters were standing near the motor pool, hunched over. They hadn't spotted him yet. He realized he hadn't seen any since the big one came out. It was as if the Behemoth had acted like a protective parent, since it came alone. The decision he'd made to steal the Behemoth's meals must have been an act of war. He'd never seen so many Molters, probably a hundred or more. They approached

cautiously. He was aware of how fast they could move. If he fought he would die. There were too many.

Jonah ran to the nearest UV and threw the driver's side door open. He shut it and looked across the field. The Molters raced toward him. He had no idea if the vehicle would run or even had fuel; guess he was about to find out. Jonah turned the ignition switch, and the vehicle started. He threw it into gear and stomped on the gas. He tore across the field and laughed, realizing the vehicle was FMC, fully mission capable, one of the many acronyms drilled into him while in the military.

Jonah was pretty sure he was safe. That they didn't know how to open a car door. Then the door behind him opened.

"Damn it!"

Jonah yanked the wheel to the right. The Molter lost its grip, and the door slammed shut. Jonah put the accelerator to the floor and shot up the road. The creatures were all he could see out his side mirrors, but they were falling back, unable to keep up with the speed of the vehicle. Jonah's breathing slowed as he drove out onto the main road.

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CHAPTER 21

The next morning, Jonah went back to the base and stocked up on everything he needed. He'd abandoned the UV when he spotted the opportunity. He wasn't about to risk his life on a vehicle that would surely break down. He'd chosen a popular car instead—ironic considering its inception, that one of the safest and most dependable vehicles was the brainchild of the most notorious dictator in all of human history.

He knew the country well. Finding suitable cover for each night wasn't too difficult. The Molters mostly depended on sight. He had a few close encounters, but they certainly couldn't run as fast as he could drive.

Jonah remembered the friends he'd lost. The people he'd been closest to in the whole world were gone. He thought of Sharon most of all, of their wedding day and how naive they both had been. In hindsight he could see that they had been way too young and immature to handle the complexity of that kind of commitment.

Jonah had asked her to marry him shortly after meeting her. He remembered how she was gazing into his eyes before they'd kissed and officially become man and wife—the hope in them and layout for her future that she was mentally building around him. He was the happiest he'd ever been in his life at that moment. Then she kissed him. He knew she would complement him in a way none ever had. Their bond would prevent him from remembering all of the horrible things he'd done, and had to do. That kiss . . .

Movement in the tree up ahead yanked the warming thought from Jonah's mind. The sun had just dipped, and the Molter was moving out onto a branch, ready to spring as if Jonah couldn't see it. A drone, driven to feed its master, a Behemoth Jonah could choose to bypass, or could hunt down and kill. He hadn't decided yet.

"Stupid animal."

Jonah slowed to a stop and got out. He took aim with his automatic rifle, just as he'd done the previous night and countless nights before, and he got a clean head shot that dropped the Molter from the perch it stood poised to leap from.

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PART 2

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Henrytown

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CHAPTER 22

The man before him sat against the wall, staring blankly, arms splayed out loosely, struggling to breathe with lungs that no longer belonged to him. As Jonah waited for whoever he had been to die and one of them to emerge, he did a mental checklist to make sure he had everything he needed. He'd killed a lot of Molters in the last few weeks, adding to the tremendous amount he'd killed over the years since he'd put Oberstein behind him, and the main reason for this stop was to gather ammo.

He'd known by heart where many of the military bases were in the area, so it was especially easy to locate them now with a map. He'd been to them when he was in the military himself, as a driver for a colonel. They'd been to this one in particular many times.

Though there were guns, ammo, and other useful supplies left, the base itself was in shambles. It looked like a war had happened here. Judging by the aftermath, that wasn't much of an exaggeration. One likely had occurred. The place was completely abandoned, and Jonah wondered where the soldiers and the local people of the town had gone. They couldn't have all become Molters.

Maybe they'd left because of winter, making the mistake of searching for warmer climates in hope those places would be safer. If they had moved away they were wrong to do so; Molters thrived in warmer climates. Jonah had made the correlation between the Molters and the cold, but others probably hadn't. He hoped he wasn't the only one, though.

There had been at least one Behemoth while the soldiers were there, because what remained of it was about a kilometer up the road. Reduced to only its upper half, it was rotting. Jonah could have driven around it, but he didn't. He steered toward it and helped smash what was left even deeper into the snowy road. Its corpse crushed easily as if it were liquefying like the Molters did once they cocooned themselves, its bones no stronger than tent poles now. Even on the cold day, it had smelled so bad that Jonah had rolled his window up.

Every weapon he could have ever wanted was at that base, including the fun kind, the kind that caused many people to join the military in the first place: the kind that went boom. There were also plenty of MREs and water. It was winter, but the temperature hadn't been consistently freezing yet, so the bottled water was still drinkable. Sometimes the bottles ruptured in extremely cold environments, but a soldier—or an ex-soldier, and anyone else for that matter—could never have too much water. MREs could withstand a freeze, and they wouldn't expire for years. Even if they did, Jonah would eat them anyway.

What he didn't count on was how much weaponry there was. The crown jewel, the weapon he'd wished he could have used at the base in Oberstein, was there: the fully automatic grenade launcher, one that could be mounted to

a vehicle. Though many of the weapons were a two-man lift, Jonah had learned ways of going it alone during the war. Rigging tow straps to help load something heavy was one of those ways.

He'd spent the entire day searching for and gathering the weapons, supplies, and ammo. He couldn't take it all, but he helped himself to as much as any soldier would fantasize about having for ideal fighting conditions, which was to say the unforeseen kind. What he couldn't take with him as he moved on, but what he thought he might need later, he took a few hours stashing in designated places nearby and marked them with a map. He couldn't leave these supplies at the base, unfortunately. Anybody on the same path he was on would think to look there. With the world the way it was, a man who had empathy for someone who may or may not come along was a dead man.

Jonah took what he wanted from military bases. With all he'd done for his country and the world, he knew he had the right to it all. He'd earned it. But when it came to taking anything from civilian stores, he laid money down when he could or traded something of equal value for it. He liked to think money still had value, so he'd held on to it for when he had to deal with other people. He felt there was something about it that would keep him human—and that seemed important, something to maintain. It seemed like the right thing to do anyway, even if sometimes the only person who would know what he'd done was he himself. Except that was who he needed to do it for.

The Molter within the man began to stir, forcing him to gasp. His face bled dark, trickling globules. Jonah stood and unscrewed the silencer from the automatic pistol. The fleshy seam in the middle of the man's face deepened and then split, spritzing blood in a mist, revealing the Molter beneath.

Jonah had mapped out the run back to the truck. He knew he would be pursued. He was counting on it, hoping for it. Jonah had hit the base during the day and made sure to leave a little time for it to get dark. He'd carefully stalked the vacant hallways, silenced pistol drawn, refamiliarizing himself with the base he'd been to years before so nothing would slow him down when he had to leave. Silencers had become his new best friend.

The Molter got its bearings and began to tear the human flesh off with four-clawed hands. Molters reduced the human hand, losing the little finger. Jonah had no idea why. Pistol aimed, Jonah crept close, closer than he ever would have when he'd first encountered them. He waited for it to see him for what he was, to see that predatory trigger, and watched the instinct click in its eyes as they locked on him. Those sunken, bulbous eyes never left Jonah as he approached, the Molter's mouth working open and closed for the first time, revealing large teeth it hoped to sink into Jonah's flesh so it could feed on his blood.

Jonah fired four times, the bullets punching into its thick skull, killing it.

The gunshots sounded like explosions down the hall, reverberating throughout the supply building, even louder because it was night, alerting the

dozen or so Molters that were already inside on the top floors, hunting for him.

Almost instantly Jonah heard them running above—even though his ears were ringing from the gunshots—and trying to get to where he was ready for them in the basement. Jonah had lured the Molters inside by leaving the door open and food on the floor. There were maybe only a dozen, but he fantasized that there were even more—hundreds. The idea of killing as many as possible soothed him, like the warm rush of alcohol coating his stomach.

He climbed up on a filing cabinet below a window he'd left unlocked. The Molter he'd killed had slumped over on its side, blood pouring out of its head. When Jonah turned he saw them. The Molters had already made it downstairs. As he closed the window, he couldn't quite tell how many of them there were, but there were definitely more than a dozen, as he'd hoped. Maybe twice as many. Not hundreds, but there were enough.

His glimpse of them was brief, and he didn't see any military uniforms even though it was a military base. It meant they had been civilians before they'd molted, unless they'd taken their uniforms off, found regular clothing, and gotten dressed. The thought almost made Jonah laugh out loud, instead of on the inside, which was what he mostly allowed himself to do these days.

He smiled and climbed down the ladder to where his truck was, the bed weighted down with everything he'd taken. He got in the cab and locked the doors in case there was a Molter he'd missed. He didn't want that kind of passenger. He knew the Molters heard the truck when he started it, and he honked the horn and revved the engine, knowing it would infuriate them as they tried to figure out how to get to him.

As he drove away, he thought they'd likely backtrack to get out of the building, and that would take at least thirty seconds or a minute, maybe longer. He wasn't sure if they knew how to retrace their steps. Even if they could, it wasn't enough time to get their teeth into him. Jonah floored it, and as he watched the rearview mirror, he took a detonator out of his pocket.

Encountering something new always gave humans pause as their subconscious deduced whether it was beneficial or a threat. Something deadly almost always created an immediate, undeniable, and visceral reaction. Molters were repulsive, the biggest threat humanity had ever faced, and their being alive meant more humans would die. Jonah thought of rats, spiders, snakes, viruses, or anything else that was a threat to people as something that also created such a reaction. A predator that hungered for blood fit in nicely with that group.

As Jonah had collected all he'd needed, he'd planted explosives at key points of the building along the way that would ensure absolute destruction. All the while he looked forward to it, imagining their surprise once they realized he'd outsmarted them, and their pain once the blast hit them. Such pain was a tiny fraction of what Jonah would feel for the rest of his life after what happened to his friends.

It was overkill. Jonah knew that. He'd need the explosives at some point in the future, but for right now he didn't care. He couldn't help himself. He needed what was about to happen to happen, and he couldn't help the feeling that he was doing something positive for humanity: eradicating as many of *them* as he could personally.

He squeezed the detonator, and the building behind him exploded, turning into a fireball that melted the cold surrounding it, the blast echoing mightily as smoky hands clawed into the night sky.

Jonah's pulse raced in exhilaration as he tried to stay on the road while keeping his eyes on the roaring fire in the rearview mirror, gratified by how much pain he knew the Molters were in before their flesh was melted off their mutated fucking bones.

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CHAPTER 23

Oberstein was the place where Jonah had spent time while in the military and where his friends had died. He would never go back there if he could help it—not for the rest of his life; not after everything he'd been through. It wouldn't be worth it to him. That place reminded him of death, and he'd wanted to get away from what was familiar.

He often craved a drink but did his best to put it out of his mind, even though it was the resulting escape that he truly desired. He remembered the parties he'd been to, how many times he'd been drunk on a beach and had pursued whichever woman he was interested in at the time. He might not ever be able to do that again. The beach he was thinking of was probably completely vacant, with just the waves crashing on the sand where so many people had once made memories.

He'd passed many pubs that no doubt still had plenty of alcohol, and he could have stopped and stayed for weeks, drinking away his memories—could have drunk until he didn't feel the cold, his guilt, his regrets, or any feelings at all.

Until he sobered up, that is. Escaping through alcohol was something the boy he had once been would have done, but now only a man was present. Jonah had matured in ways that were subtle but still noticeable to him since he'd stopped drinking. Aging also contributed. Months passed quickly.

Quitting drinking was nothing compared to quitting smoking. Now that was hard. He'd run across others who smoked, but he'd chosen not to partake. It was getting easier, but he still craved a smoke now and then—mostly after encountering familiar triggers, habits he formed while he was in the military.

There was nothing like a cigarette after returning from a mission, and since it was best to still have the mentality of a soldier to deal with the world, Jonah often wanted a reward. There were other ways to fill that need, especially when he was conscious of why it was happening, but the biggest reason to quit something was probably that it was no longer being manufactured. He was only guessing, but he had to go with his gut, how he suspected the world was now.

He'd decided to keep pressing east, toward the mountains and forests, but he was still in Germany. He'd been traveling a long time, and he used maps to navigate. He moved during the day, when he could find Molters and kill them, and slept at night when Molters were out hunting him.

Even with all that had happened, he was struck by how gorgeous the country was, especially during the day. A snow-covered peak was one of the most breathtaking sights he'd ever seen, and they were everywhere along his travels, especially during the winter. All he'd have to do was look left or right as he walked or drove. All of what was happening now was so contrary to these views; he was sometimes still amazed that such horrible things could take place in such a beautiful country.

Food wasn't really a problem. He would take what he needed when he came across it, and he could still hunt during the winter. Molters were more interested in places where humans congregated—cities and towns especially—than in places where wildlife did. It was only himself he needed to feed, and he didn't eat much. That didn't mean he wouldn't enjoy a full meal one day, maybe with dessert too. Maybe he'd eat until he felt like his stomach would split open.

Jonah would kill in the morning and then cook and eat during the day. He'd stashed MREs all over the country and had them marked on his maps in case he was starving. He had MREs with him, but he hadn't eaten any this week. He hadn't needed to, not with all his successful hunts.

Still, he often envisioned the hot meals as he drove and how tasty they would be when he eventually indulged his hunger. It was *something* to look forward to. He ate about one MRE per week and would then save up the snacks and desserts and have them all at once, every month or so. The thought of all that food in the back of his truck made his mouth water.

Though having enough food wasn't a problem, being hungry still was because of his activity level. He was constantly on foot. But he'd grown accustomed to falling asleep that way. Some nights were harder than others. Every now and then it was difficult to fall asleep. An empty pit in his stomach sometimes kept him awake no matter how much he reminded himself of the meal that awaited him the next day. Only the longer he forced himself to live that way, the easier it got. Unfortunately, doing that meant his body was almost constantly in survival mode, and he fatigued easily. Jonah knew to plan his exertions accordingly, usually shortly after eating.

He'd always keep the map to show him where the MREs were, but even if he lost it, he'd still be able to remember where to find most of the stash locations. The MREs would be a contingency, a safety net, and with vehicles abound, he felt confident he'd be able to get back to those locations before he starved to death—if it came to that.

Finding water wasn't too difficult either. Fresh water melted during the day and trickled off cliffsides. He carried canteens and filled them whenever possible. He heated fresh snow over a fire when he camped, and he camped when he got tired. When he needed rest, he would either sleep in his truck, or, depending on the safety of the area and the shelter available, he would stay indoors or pitch a tent.

Pitching a tent turned out to be the safest way to sleep. Most houses and buildings were abandoned, but because cities and towns attracted Molters, they were Jonah's least reliable option. Modern-day humans had become used to secure shelter, and Jonah was no different, so finding a place to sleep with a roof over his head was sometimes worth the risk.

Relying on the inquisitiveness of Molters kept him safe. They were just animals, but they were smart enough to be alert. Alertness meant hesitation toward the unfamiliar, and because he surrounded his camp with noise traps,

he could get the drop on them if he had to. Molters didn't usually hunt in groups through the woods. They tended to group themselves when hunting near a town where humans gathered. He mostly made the traps with thick brush and one large opening to escape through, and he hung the brush with holiday bells.

Bells that once reminded him of family and merriment now reminded him of deterring predators that wanted to feed on his hot blood. He'd gotten used to their clinking as he slept, as one would grow used to a ticking clock, but when they were snagged by a Molter or anything else (one time a deer), their noise became a continuous crash and Jonah's eyes would pop open in an instant.

Luckily, so far he'd only had to kill a few Molters as he camped in the woods. If that had to be done, he just kept moving. Forests were dependably scarce of Molters, not just because there weren't many people around, but also because Molters didn't care much for the cold. They preferred warmer climates. They were still around during the winter, lurking in the shadows on a constant hunt, but there weren't nearly as many of them as there were when it was warm.

Jonah was thankful for that, because there'd been so many when he'd first encountered them that if their population had continued to increase the way it had been, he was sure human beings would now be extinct.

Molters were often naked, their pale, corrugated flesh their armor, with no hint of human sex. Sometimes they still wore the clothing of the human that had molted and were in all manners of dress that normal folks wore. Once, Jonah encountered a Molter wearing a grandmother's nightgown. It was one of the most frightening things he'd ever seen. He wondered if their simple predatory minds were capable of putting on clothing.

Judging from their nests, they used one another for warmth when they slept during the day, but since mostly he'd encountered them on the hunt at night and some were dressed, he thought that maybe they could put on human clothes. Or maybe he was just afraid that they could. The thought of them like that, digging through a closet to find the right outfit, was ridiculous and made Jonah laugh.

The Behemoths were still being born, but most likely they were only populating to get ready for spring and summer. That's what Jonah thought, anyway, so he didn't mind the cold one bit. It meant he was still relatively safe from them. The cold weakened them, and both Molters and Behemoths could often be found in a suspended stasis, similar to hibernation, but that was only at extremely low temperatures and often away from where their typical hunting territories tended to be, closer to the mountains.

Jonah wondered why. It was like they were in hiding—a contingency for their species. That's what it seemed like, anyway. He'd only seen it twice, once with a nest of Molters, the other time a groggy Behemoth. They were much easier to kill that way. Each kill felt like a reward, not only for himself,

but for humanity.

The missions Jonah sent himself on were something he needed, a path to follow that gave him purpose. Now *they* filled the hole inside of him that he'd tried to stuff with drugs and alcohol and cigarettes for so long. Since he didn't have those things anymore, or want them, and when he was on the hunt or gained any opportunity to wipe those creatures off the face of the earth, Jonah never hesitated. He thought of it as his job, something that had to be done, and he needed to do it. They had hurt him, and now he wanted to hurt them back.

Jonah wasn't sure where he was going exactly; he just knew he wanted to get somewhere where there wasn't anyone around. He was being selfish, but he didn't care. A man with his knowledge and training should try to gather stragglers and get them to a safe area by traveling by day and setting up a protective perimeter at night; get them to another military base or somewhere that was fortified.

Only he didn't. He just wanted to get deep into the mountains and forget about his past life. Build a cabin, maybe. Hunt. Eat. Sleep. It would be enough for him, he thought. He hoped. Regardless of what would happen, he was on his way.

There were lots of vehicles to choose from in every abandoned town, and Jonah had his pick. He'd chosen a large one, a four-by-four with an extended cab like the bearded man had, the one he'd crossed paths with on the road before his friends had died, who'd first told him about the Behemoths. This brand of truck was well known for its reliability, and so lengthy it took him about five seconds to trudge past it through the snow.

Essentials were stored in the cab, which included spare boots and laces, plenty of foot powder, dry socks, T-shirts, and underwear; he made sure they were always within reach. Attention to hygiene was paramount. Although he didn't always have access to dry conditions—sunlight was essential to drying wet socks—his warm cab did the job.

Most of his arsenal was in the storage box located in the bed. Other than the weapons he used daily, he also kept the high-caliber ones in there, like the grenade launcher and the spare ammo too. He'd grabbed attachments like scopes and flashlights, even though he knew he'd hardly use them. For close-quarters skirmishes he preferred iron sights whenever possible. Everything he'd collected weighted down the bed of the large truck considerably as he drove, but the truck was so powerful and stable that it could handle all of that extra weight.

A gun rack inside the cab held a shotgun with a flashlight mounted on it. It was one of the rare instances when he added an attachment—other than a silencer—to a gun. He used the shotgun to clear out Molter nests whenever they were near where he'd sleep. He also had a bolt-action rifle with a scope

—another exception—that he used to snipe Molters from afar. The mountains would swallow up the echo of the shot. Each kill gave him a warmth of pleasure in his gut, like drinking a shot of premium whiskey.

There I go again.

When it came to handling Behemoths, some were larger than others, but that didn't really matter when it came to explosives. Jonah thought of the first Behemoth he'd encountered, the one he'd killed at the base a few years ago. It was the largest he'd seen so far. Maybe it was because it was the oldest one alive at the time.

Jonah also stored the explosives in the storage box, ones powerful enough to hobble any Behemoth. Only, that meant that he'd need to sneak up on them or bait them into a trap, and that wasn't always easy. If it blew near them, they were dead, or they would surely die from their wounds. Jonah never stuck around to make sure. Even if they didn't die right away, there wasn't much they could do with pieces of them blown off and bleeding from ragged holes caused by the blast.

After a while Jonah had trouble even remembering who he was. Where there used to be a friend, son, husband, and someone who enjoyed life, now there was only a survivor—a killer. His old self had died, who he used to be, and another man had been born in his place. He saw everything differently, acted differently, thought differently. His view of the world was uncontrollable, as if it passed through alien eyes now, compared to how he saw it before. He felt some connection to who he used to be, but it was deep within him and nearly gone.

There were memories, mostly guilty ones, but that was all, and if he needed to, if society somehow resumed the way it had been, he could fake it. He would have to mimic the person he'd once been. But what disturbed him the most was how miserable he thought he'd feel if human order was restored and how he might be for the rest of his life. It was an emptiness that was hollowed out in him, from all that he'd been through and done, and that might never be filled again. Killing Molters helped, but it was only temporary.

Gotta keep moving.

He'd made the decision to die multiple times, but this time felt different, real, as if he was actually going to follow through with it. He wasn't going to do it himself. No, he couldn't do that—well, not in the way that such things were traditionally done—but he could set up explosives and then put a bullet in his brain before they blew.

There would be no trace of him after the blast, as if he were tricking the universe so that it might not ever have known he existed. And after many years, everyone he'd ever known would be dead too, and that—absence of knowledge of his existence—would actually come to fruition.

Staying motivated was a cornerstone of the military. Jonah—along with all his other compatriots and most who had come before him—had been taught it. Getting low and losing hope and everything going to shit was common, especially during a war, but a soldier keeps fighting no matter what. You didn't have to be in the military to know that. There were many civilians who followed through with this same strategy every day with their jobs, whatever problems they had, or even raising their kids. Except it was always expected of a soldier. Soldiers had no excuse because they'd been educated to navigate the obstacles and depths of hardship and with a purpose.

Jonah was wallowing. He knew he was. Sometimes he couldn't help it, but more and more his self-pity was making him sick and ashamed. What would his parents think? If they were even still alive. He didn't know if they were, but he also couldn't be sure they were dead. That was what he needed to remember. He didn't *know* what was going on in the rest of the world. He'd only heard rumors that sometime in the past few years the Molters had reached the United States, or so other survivors had said. Reached. That was a relative term. Whatever was going on in the rest of the world was all speculation until he had laid eyes on it for himself.

The one thing he did know was that he needed to make some changes—permanent ones. He needed to drive on, keep moving forward. So he made the decision to do just that, right then and there, and he forced himself to change his attitude as he drove.

"Be a man. Be a soldier."

Until he realized what had been gnawing at him like a procrastinated task. He was afraid. Not for himself—obviously—but of losing someone again. Being alone was safe. The idea that he often toyed with and even had desired had now become his reality, and that was bullshit.

From now on he would ignore all those nagging feelings of hopelessness, common to everyday life but especially during a war, because that's what this was. Humans were fighting for their very existence. *They* were who deserved to survive, not those creatures. His depression was hobbling him the way explosives hobbled a Behemoth, and he was tired of being disgusted with himself and allowing his own brain to bring him down to the depths of despair again and again and again.

Unfortunately, since he'd made that resolute decision, he was running low on gas. Fuel wasn't a problem—not yet. There were plenty of vehicles with full tanks, fuel hoarded by the paranoid, and military bases with fueling stations that Jonah knew how to access. He guessed they would still be dependable for a few more years.

Except he'd missed a refueling opportunity on purpose when he'd allowed his mind to get sick again, when he'd decided he was going to die. Now the idea of *those* thoughts made him sick. It was getting dark, though. He had no choice but to think of a plan in the morning, so he pulled over to get some sleep.

Jonah opened his eyes. He was freezing. There was no cold quite like a Bavarian winter. He'd been dreaming about Sharon. She was still alive in the dream. Still alive. He wished—wished all of his friends still were. The depth of their loss hit him every day. Because of him they were dead.

No Molters had come during the night. He kept the doors locked anyway. If they were out hunting and found him, Jonah would simply drive off. He unzipped his sleeping bag and got dressed. Then he started the truck and turned the heat all the way up.

Outside the truck the gusty wind rocked Jonah on his feet and howled all around him. The cold snow stung his flesh like a thousand pinpricks, and the wind eagerly licked those same spots, making him even colder. He'd grown used to it—not just in the last few months, but when he was stationed here. Once you go through something, you can do it again. Your brain remembers, and so he remembered how to deal with the cold. The trick was to ignore it, to understand that—if you were prepared—it was only temporary. After that time, however long it was, you could then get warm again. Especially in a hot cab waiting to be climbed into.

The shovel easily scooped snow away from the large tires—not that Jonah needed to do this. The powerful truck was perfectly capable of pulling out of the snow that had accumulated overnight. He did it for two reasons: one, the hard work would keep him warm until the cab heated up enough, and two, it allowed him to think back.

Working that way allowed him to escape his new world. Whether that was for the hours when he slept, or for the moments he was doing anything other than thinking about what his present dangerous circumstances were, he needed the escapism, and he never missed the opportunity. There were all kinds of ways: reading, remembering favorite songs, recalling the past, and getting work done. Working was best.

He readjusted his stance by lowering himself to a comfortable height; then he spread his feet more, watched his boots disappear under the snow's depth, and dug deeper with the shovel, scraping, shoveling the snow quickly, faster, starting to breathe heavier now, getting warmer, remembering . . .

Sharon had been staring at Jonah most of the night. They hadn't met yet, and he was high, and he remembered wanting to be alone—ironic considering he was at a party—because he'd wanted to numb the pain from everything that had happened during the war and from his frustration at getting kicked out of a military he loved. Unfortunately, he'd mixed drugs and alcohol, and alcohol sometimes made him remember all too well, remember stuff he couldn't get out of his head.

More accurately, Jonah wasn't looking to meet anyone. Sharon must have been able to tell that he was under the influence, even though they were

strangers, because she'd looked concerned. She also seemed patient. Deeper than that, she looked at him the way only a few women in his life had ever looked at him. It was an understanding, a connection, the kind that expressed the bond that had already formed between them even though they hadn't even spoken to each other yet.

At first she was asking Jonah's friends about him. He remembered seeing Gil and Sharon looking over at him together. Talking about him. His memory wasn't so sharp. Then he didn't see them. Jonah was left to wallow as he'd hoped he would, and he'd thought Sharon had left the party when she'd suddenly been standing right in front of him, looking him in the eyes. She said she'd take care of him and that he didn't have to worry about anything that night.

Even though Jonah had taken care of himself more times than he could count while under the influence and didn't need her, he'd allowed it because he liked being around her. They'd only just met, but they needed each other. He had no doubt she'd be talking to him even if he were sober, especially then, or if he were missing limbs or been disfigured like some of his compatriots.

Jonah wiped wetness from his cheeks—whether it was from his memories or the powerful whining wind blowing the wet snow in his face, he wasn't sure. He watched as more fresh powder blew all over the large truck in a powerful gust and then past it, towing his gaze to one of the snow-covered peaks in the distance, the direction he planned on heading.

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CHAPTER 24

As night fell a cocoon hung heavy from a tree. Steam slowly wafted from it as it bulged grotesquely from the inside, its warmth melting the snow that fell upon it. The Behemoth within struggled to fit, ready to tear through the ripe skin of the womb, like a boil about to burst.

The bulbous, heavy cocoon suddenly ruptured, splashing its gooey contents on the snowy road below it. The snow melted instantly, creating a cloud of mist, and small Infectors scurried in all directions, their instinct driving them to search for a potential host.

The haze dissipated, revealing the young Behemoth shakily standing upright. It stretched for the first time, going from large to massive when it pointed its many legs upward and outward, easily covering a distance of sixty feet. Then it relaxed and withdrew back into itself, getting its bearings on the world it had been born into, the opposite of being inside the cozy safety of the cocoon.

The truck sped up the snowy road, running over Infectors, squashing them easily under the heavy snow tires. Jonah leaned left on the seat. Sometimes his lower back still hurt from his first encounter with a Behemoth. He stomped on the accelerator, and the truck's powerful engine easily obliged, reaching speeds over 130 kilometers per hour.

The precarious and dangerously slick, icy road dipped before rising up again, allowing the truck to gain even more speed. The stuttering torque of the powerful engine resounded through the night.

Jonah knew better, knew not to allow his emotions to affect his decisions, but he couldn't help it. No matter how many internal pep talks he gave himself, he just didn't like himself that much anymore.

"Fuck *you*!"

The truck rammed into the Behemoth, causing it to screech in pain as it was flung up and then over the vehicle, landing in a heap of tree-length legs. The truck's air bag deployed. The truck whipped around and spun in a hundred circles before going over an embankment. Deep, fresh snow flew up the windshield as if it had crashed into a lake, and the truck's momentum halted when it ran into something Jonah couldn't see under the tidal wave of wet.

It took Jonah a few seconds to remember what had happened. He had a vague memory of a terrible nightmare and realized he'd lost consciousness. He was OK, but the truck definitely wasn't going anywhere anytime soon. It was deep in a ravine and had nearly toppled over. The truck had crashed into a downed tree that had likely fallen as a result of heavy snow and ice.

Fortunately, the snow wasn't so deep that Jonah couldn't see above it, and he was able to roll down the window. He climbed out, bringing along his automatic rifle and machete. He climbed up the embankment on all fours, doing his best over the unsteady powder. His pants, coat, and gloves were all

insulated, so he was dry, and also hot from climbing up the embankment so fast.

The impact from the truck had severely hobbled the Behemoth. It murmured in pain and was doing its best to stand on legs that were flattened and oozing gooey blood; it seemed the truck had run over them. Its stinger-equipped tail had been crushed too; it dragged uselessly behind the Behemoth. It was just an infant, after all, and was only going on instinct, which meant it intended to flee.

The young Behemoth looked back at Jonah, and Jonah saw fear on its face, what any newborn's expression would be in a survival situation such as this. The potential of its violence hadn't been realized yet. For a moment Jonah felt sorry for it. The thought was brief, though, as he considered how much death it was capable of.

He pulled his machete and rushed it, chopping into its body. The Behemoth slashed with the legs that were still functioning, but it was so tall that they cleared Jonah's head. Jonah stabbed into its midsection, and the thing roared. After that it didn't want to fight anymore. It only wanted to escape, as if it could somehow heal and live. It was mistaken. Jonah couldn't allow that. The farther away it got, the more dangerous it would be. The Behemoth, though trying to get away, was still lunging back with its legs in desperation.

Jonah sheathed his machete and aimed his silenced automatic rifle. He tugged and released the trigger—the shots' silent *cracks* were swallowed up by the piercing wind—firing multiple bursts into its head, putting it out of its misery.

Jonah felt a hand on his shoulder and looked to see an Infector trying to get to the soft exposed flesh of his neck, the same kind of small creature he now knew had turned Daisy into a Molter. He quickly unzipped his coat and threw it off, aiming and waiting until it showed itself again. He was glad he'd only felt the bitter cold bite into him. He didn't want to become a Molter today.

The Infector eventually crawled out from under the coat, showing its legs first and looking like a large, shiny spider. Jonah bent down and picked his coat up, exposing it. Instead of wasting a bullet, Jonah stomped on it as hard as he could. It mashed under his heavy boot, feeling like a hard rind giving way to soft fruit beneath. The feel of it made him nauseous.

Jonah looked around, trying to spot more Infectors. He saw another one farther away, facing him. He knew they could jump, so he fired one shot, killing it. He scanned the area but couldn't spot any more of them. They would either find a host or lie in hibernation until a host discovered them. There was nothing Jonah could do to stop the ones that had escaped now.

The truck was in worse shape than he'd thought. The front end was crushed,

and the right tire was now as high as the hood was. Jonah could see fluids leaking everywhere, and could smell them too.

Jonah cursed silently.

He'd let his temper flare up again, and now he'd have to leave behind all of the food, extra water, tools, useful supplies, and weapons he'd gathered over the last few months. He'd only be able to take the essentials that he could carry, most notably his machete, automatic rifle, silenced shotgun, silenced pistol, night-vision goggles, and whatever else he could cram into his backpack. He'd have to leave the rest. It was beyond frustrating because of how much time he'd spent gathering everything on those missions, and he only had himself to blame. Being forced to leave most of it behind was essentially failing at a mission, and mission failures were unacceptable to a soldier.

At least he'd killed a Behemoth, and he could always fix the truck, but not now and definitely not at night. Tonight his mission would be to find shelter because he couldn't stay in the truck any longer. If he did he could wake up buried beneath the snow.

There were no sign of Molters in the area. He'd just killed a newborn Behemoth, and it—or the Infectors—hadn't had the opportunity to create Molters to feed itself, so traveling on foot wouldn't deter him tonight. Eventually he'd cross into another Behemoth's territory, and its age—he didn't know how long they lived—contributed to how many Molters served it. He'd still keep his finger on the trigger, though.

The positive aspect of there being a lot of Molters was that they hadn't found humans to kill. The negative was that every one of them had once been human, which meant a person had had to die. No Molters in the area could mean that they'd already fed, killing humans and draining them of blood, cocooned themselves, and become a meal for the Behemoth they served.

Maybe all this time Jonah had been wrong. Maybe the rarity of the creatures meant that humanity was losing. It messed with his head. It was hard to guess how long ago they'd ceased to be people and molted. As far as he knew, Molters could live months in that hibernation stasis before they fed again. He'd learned much about them, but he didn't know how much longer they could stay that way. Maybe years. There was still so much he didn't know.

A mission to find out more about them intrigued him. That appealed to him most of all.

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CHAPTER 25

There was smoke in the distance. Jonah wasn't sure what had caused it, but it was directly in his path, and there were mountains on both sides. Unless he was going over them—he wasn't about to turn back—he would have to pass through.

The town was nestled at the bottom of a hill and secluded by spectacular mountain views. There was sparse forest, and he could see a lake through the trees. The whole scene looked like a creation, an artist's rendition of someone's fantasy of a winter vacation. Jonah would have loved to stay here if he'd had the opportunity—before it was destroyed. It looked like it had been carpet-bombed, the way towns looked in the aftermath of World War II. No doubt people had set the buildings to explode, a failed attempt to destroy what had driven them out.

Even with all the damage, there could still be Molter nests or some other threat in proximity to the town, but Jonah was so tired from walking all night that he didn't really care about its condition. He needed to find cover so he could get some rest. If anything decided to hunt him, hopefully it would happen after he had a few hours of sleep. He could get up, kill whatever it was, clear out a Molter nest if he had to, and then go back to bed, before he moved on.

As he approached he searched for any complete structures, somewhere he could bed down for the night, and then he saw there was still an intact house. At least it looked that way from his perspective. The ones around it were in shambles. He guessed there was a reason it was whole, and doubted it was a good one, so he readied his shotgun.

The house was completely dark, but he had night-vision goggles (NVGs) if he needed them. He'd waited to turn on the flashlight attachment until he got inside. There was definitely a nest. He could smell it. Their presence left an unmistakable stench, like burning feces, even in winter. He just needed to figure out where. There were flesh piles nearby but out of view. He could smell them too. It meant this town had been intact not too long ago—weeks or months, it was hard to tell. At least there weren't any swarms of flies. Not in this cold.

The nest would most likely be upstairs or in the basement if there was one. It was hard to see anywhere his shotgun wasn't pointing. He didn't see a basement, so he crept upstairs, shotgun aimed above each step he carefully placed his boot on, ready for anything that might jump out at him.

The light shone down the hallway as he rounded the corner. There were bedrooms to the right and left and one down at the far end. He shone the shotgun in the left bedroom first, saw nothing living inside as he passed, and kept his eyes down the hall to the farthest bedroom, expecting a Molter to come running out at him. It was still night so the Molters—if there were any—likely knew he was there already.

After peeking into the room to his right, he saw where the nest was. The Molters piled on top of one another, huddling together as they slept, like rat babies. It was nighttime, yet they rested. It was because they'd exhausted the town of hosts. Jonah felt his anger rise.

Each seemed to be facing a different direction, ready to spring out at any unwelcome guest, but even a predator sometimes had trouble hearing a well-trained soldier. Jonah turned off the flashlight and aimed his silencer-equipped semiautomatic shotgun. He pulled the trigger as fast as he could, sending out five rounds of widespread shots. The group thrashed and twisted as Jonah killed them. One of the Molters underneath them all survived; it sprang to its feet and lunged, snarling as it did, but Jonah shot it in the face.

Finally with a place to sleep, he exhaled. Before that he'd at least briefly search the town for more of them before closing his eyes.

When he walked out of the house to do just that, he saw eyes on him. Not those of Molters, but human ones, and the men were armed. The three of them looked like American soldiers, judging by the uniforms they were wearing and their three-man, wedge-shaped fighting position and intervals. They must have been going for that house too, but Jonah had beat them to it—or had they allowed him to go in and accomplish their mission for them? What better way to welcome himself to the town, Jonah thought. Considering how Jonah held himself with shotgun aimed, the other soldiers obviously saw he was someone of further use.

The one with the mustache seemed to be the team leader. He had an automatic rifle ready to fire and must have recognized Jonah's background, because he was giving him proper hand signals. He put his finger to his lips and motioned for Jonah to come toward them.

Verbal acknowledgment between soldiers wasn't always necessary. Those who served stood out and were often recognized by one another by their walk alone. A simple nod was all it took sometimes. They obviously saw Jonah's cold-weather gear and guns. The hand signals could have been a test, but Jonah's compliance obviously reassured them; test passed.

The team leader had NVGs dangling from his neck. That was why they'd seen Jonah before he'd seen them. The other two had their weapons lowered. One had a baseball cap on backward and held an automatic rifle too. The other held a German single-shot grenade launcher.

"How are ya?" the team leader said.

"Looking for shelter for the night," Jonah said.

"Night's almost over."

"I only need a few hours."

"You may have come to the wrong place."

"I'd like to stay, if that's all right."

The team leader glanced at the others. They didn't object. "Up to you."

"You guys from here?"

"Until *they* showed up. We were able to handle them at first, but then the

Behemoth got hungry. After that we started losing the town."

"It was beautiful," the grenadier said. "You should have seen it."

"I bet it was," Jonah said.

"Want to help us before bed?" the team leader said. "If you do we'll set you up in the town suite."

His men laughed.

"That must be the one less a Molter nest?" Jonah said.

"Thanks to you. No, there's one last house we need to take care of. Help us with it?"

All Jonah wanted to do was get some sleep at this point, but fellow soldiers were asking him for assistance. "All right. What do you need from me?"

"Take a walk with us down the road."

"OK."

The men grouped. Jonah could tell the men were prior service by their movement: a lowered stance, legs apart, walking quietly. What they stepped on would make noise under civilian steps but not under a trained boot. He didn't ask them why they continued to wear uniforms. It didn't make sense anymore. Maybe it was because they'd been in charge and the uniforms helped differentiate them from those they were in charge of. Or perhaps they wore the clothing for their quality, as Jonah did.

After a few minutes of uncomfortable silence—Jonah was secretly glad to run into these strangers, *somebody* to talk to—Jonah spoke up. "How many of you were there?" he said. "If you don't mind my asking?"

The men were silent, and then the team leader responded. "A little over fifty . . . including children."

It wasn't a very smart subject to bring up, but Jonah didn't know the men, and he wanted to talk about something—anything. He didn't ask any more about it, though. It was obvious they'd lost their women and children and friends, but he wondered why they hadn't left already considering their losses. He'd been in the same situation, and he couldn't wait to get away from where he'd been. The only reason had to be revenge. It was personal. Whatever was responsible for killing their loved ones was still in this town somewhere. That was why they were still here. There was killing to do.

The four men functioned as if they'd been in the same squad for years, moving through the demolished town in a wedge formation. Jonah felt confident he could survive on his own, but in a squad of four he was invincible.

Again Jonah was struck by the town's beauty, next to a lake in the pit of picturesque mountains. He definitely would have vacationed here. He briefly wondered what might have happened had he and his friends gone here instead of Oberstein. He thought about asking what the name of the town was before realizing it didn't matter anymore.

Molters suddenly appeared right before Jonah's eyes, which meant they'd been there the entire time—hunting, watching, still as statues. He saw half a

dozen, a dozen, then even more. Jonah slung his shotgun and aimed his automatic rifle. He looked up and saw them in the trees too. Their claws made them exceptional climbers. Most likely he was looking at Molters born from the loved ones of the soldiers he was backing up.

What are the Molters waiting for? he wondered.

There were at least a few targets per man, so each took a left and right step to increase one another's interval, to widen their sectors of fire.

"Fire," the team leader said.

They all did at once, killing multiple Molters each, the easiest targets to eliminate being the ones on the ground and in plain view. The gunfire attracted more than they'd spotted initially, and they spun to fire in every direction.

Molters fell out of trees and smashed to the ground. The soldiers shot those ones too, to make sure they were dead. Bullets punched through the creatures' skulls, the velocity crushing them inward. Other Molters growled from out of view.

They'd obviously killed most of them because the Molters stopped their attack. Molters were more confident with greater numbers. Only one would confront a few men, but these Molters were smart enough to recognize that armed humans were different from unarmed ones.

The men moved through the town quietly, their only sound that of the weapons when they fired. A couple of them took shots in the trees, dropping Molters that intended on leaping down on them. They were just nearing the middle of the town when they reached the lone house the team leader had mentioned. It was as intact as the one with the Molter nest Jonah had cleared. The Molter nest inside this house would have to be eliminated too.

They approached cautiously. The team leader and rifleman had their automatic rifles aimed, as did Jonah, and the grenadier had leveled his launcher, when the house suddenly expanded, then erupted into splinters, as if someone had set off powerful explosives from within.

Wood shards and bits of unidentifiable material flew everywhere. The men shielded their eyes and dropped to the ground. For a split second, it looked like the shadowy form was wearing the house. It hung off it like an open shell. Then the Behemoth moved out of the wreckage.

It had squeezed itself inside somehow—through the garage, maybe? No time to consider it as the monster was exposed, desperate, and vulnerable. The Molters loyal to it had resumed their attack and were doing everything they could to protect their leader.

The men fired, bullets tearing through the night. This was no newborn like the one Jonah had rammed on the road. This one was a full-grown adult. Bullets peppered it all over, and as the Behemoth lunged forward, roaring, the soldiers' wedge collapsed and the men spread out, expertly selecting the optimum target to bring the Behemoth down.

The automatic rifles did heavy damage, but after the grenade launcher

rocked the Behemoth with explosions—the grenadier was extremely fast at reloading—knocking parts off of it, the Behemoth was reduced to a stump of gore. It was still alive, but barely, and lurched its ugly head forward to try and bite them if it could, but another blast reduced its face to chunky pieces. Then it was dead.

"Holy shit," the grenadier said.

"Nice shot," the team leader said.

The team leader put his NVGs on and scanned the town but shook his head. No Molters in sight. The death of the Behemoth had sent them fleeing. The men lowered their weapons. Their breath showed in the cold night. For a few minutes and maybe even the next few hours, the town was safe.

Jonah lowered his automatic rifle. "I'd never seen them do that."

"What?" the team leader said. "Die so well?"

His men laughed.

"Squeeze into something so small," Jonah said.

"Houses aren't small."

"For them it is."

"Good point."

Considering the destruction of the town, the Behemoth had eluded the soldiers for a while. Most likely it had lived near it before making the town its territory.

"Was it responsible for all this?" Jonah said.

"Yes," the team leader said, taking off his NVGs. "The *fucker*."

"You should get an 'M-K' tattoo," the grenadier said. "You are a Molter-killer, my friend."

"Thanks," Jonah said. "Have you guys heard how far they've reached?"

The grenadier gestured toward the Behemoth. "You mean them?"

"Yeah."

"No one seems to know for sure. We haven't heard of any travel between the continents since all this started."

"We think it's worldwide," the team leader said. "There are rumors that it's only here and that all of Europe is a quarantine zone, but no one really knows. All comms are down. Cell phones are paperweights."

Jonah believed that Molters were worldwide like the other men did, but he still asked others their opinion, to gather as much intel on the enemy as possible.

The team leader slung his automatic rifle. "If you want to know more, there's a man who claims to have seen one of the last live TV broadcasts. He's a few towns over, if you're interested."

"'Claims'?" Jonah said.

"Be careful of the town's leader. He has quite a temper."

The men looked at one another and smiled.

"I didn't say I was headed there."

"You're going. I can tell you're the inquisitive type. Feel free to stay in the

house you cleared."

"Sounds like you're leaving?"

"We are. For good this time. We did already, but we came back. We needed to. To finish it."

Jonah understood. "Where will you go?"

"Not sure."

"My name's Jonah."

The men peered back at him, hesitating. He knew how they felt. People crossed paths frequently, and names were reserved for those who you were close to or planned on getting close with. If you didn't know someone's name, it didn't hurt as much if you had to watch that person die. Prior service weren't as sentimental about the customs of civilians, but just as military men could recognize each other without a word, they could also understand intent. Knowing each other's names was human.

"Donnelly," the team leader said.

The rifleman, who thus far hadn't said a word to Jonah, held up a hand. "Jacobs."

"Salgado," the grenadier said.

Jonah grinned. Those weren't first names. Only last names were used in the military. "Browne."

Jonah stayed in the house he cleared, as the former soldiers had suggested. He probably wouldn't have to worry about Molters for the rest of the night. He was so exhausted he didn't even care about the smell. When he rolled out his sleeping bag and lay down, he was asleep immediately.

When he woke up, he looked at his watch and realized he'd slept six hours and forty-five minutes straight! He gathered his gear and left.

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CHAPTER 26

Even though Jonah had slept enough during the night, he knew it was the previous night's sleep that was affecting him now. Really, all of his nights with limited sleep were catching up on him. He was so tired. What he could really use was a vacation. That'd be nice, wouldn't it? Maybe on another planet?

He had been born here on this planet, but here didn't feel like here anymore. It was like Earth was somewhere else now, and Jonah was forced to live among a new species intent on killing off the human race.

Can't think like that.

Mustn't think like that.

You don't know anything.

That was why he was headed to that town the soldiers had told him about. He knew a lot about the Molters and what to expect day to day, but if there was more to know, he wanted to know it. He wasn't sure how, but learning about them would give him more control over his life. It was just a gut feeling, but one that felt like a step in the right direction because he was no longer the man he used to be. He felt it to his core. He'd become the man he was afraid he'd someday be: alone; just a survivor.

A well-trained survivor, though, and like others who were exceptional at their jobs, at whatever they'd chosen to do with themselves, Jonah was excellent at his: hunting down and killing Molters. One of the soldiers had even said it himself when he suggested Jonah get an M-K tattoo. Maybe he would, he thought briefly, but then, remembering just how many tattoo shops he'd seen open for business lately, he realized that would have to wait.

His pack was beginning to weigh him down, or at least he was just now noticing it, even though it was only filled with essentials. Really, anything more than your own body weight bothers after a certain amount of time. Being on the move all day sure did it. He was nearing where the soldiers had said the town would be when he spotted a young girl running in his direction, as if she was being chased.

Jonah looked past her but didn't see anyone, or anything. He realized she was only playing, and his presence had ruined her game.

"Are you lost?" he called out.

She didn't answer him. Did she speak English? Was she aware of the danger all around her? She didn't seem to be. She likely belonged to the very town he was headed for. He asked her if she was lost again, this time in German.

She shook her head. "*Nein*."

"*Wie ist dein Name*?" Jonah said.

"Heike."

She was barely dressed for the elements and had probably wandered off. No doubt any town had guards, so they'd obviously missed her as she left. He

asked her if her home was nearby, again in German.

She nodded and pointed, and they headed in that direction.

A sign at the entrance to the town read "HENRYTOWN." It was well crafted, which meant whoever had designed it had the time to do so. This struck Jonah as odd with Molters around. The area surrounding the town was nearly as nice as the one Jonah had stayed at, except the buildings and homes weren't destroyed. Compared to the previous town, it was immaculate, and Jonah wondered how they'd stayed so safe. Maybe their fences were electrified?

Then he saw them. As Jonah approached they got larger: Behemoth heads and entrails hung atop high fences topped with barbed wire, almost like they'd been taken as trophies. Leering, they looked half alive, as if they might suddenly move, their decomposed faces frozen in their final moments of death. Whatever they were doing in this town was working.

How had they killed so many?

"That's far enough!" a guard yelled.

It was obvious to them that he was American. Even though Jonah spoke German well, he wouldn't volunteer any information if he could help it. Not to strangers. Information could spring a trap later that you didn't even know about. Best for him to let things play out until he got the information he was hoping for. Whether they had that or not he'd have to determine later.

"*Es ist Heike*!"

There was a commotion, and a few more men appeared, mostly Germans, as far as Jonah could tell, and a pretty woman came running out the front gate. She acknowledged Jonah briefly on the run, and then swooped Heike into her arms.

"She wasn't lost," Jonah said.

The woman ignored him and scolded Heike in German as she walked her back into town. Then a tall man of about six feet, five inches approached Jonah, with men armed with rifles behind him. He looked to be American too. He wore jeans and a checkered shirt and big thick boots that made him even taller. He was clean shaven, but his blue stubble hinted at a beard that could be grown within a few days.

"You alone?" he said, looking past Jonah.

"Yes."

"Where was Heike?"

"Just around the bend in the road."

"You were passing through?"

"No, I was heading this way."

His brow knitted. "Why would you do that? What business do you have in my town? Who said you could come here?"

"No one. Not business exactly. I was told there's a man here . . . Why are

you looking at me like that?" He was eyeing Jonah strangely, as if he was about to say something or tell his men to shoot him. "You don't have to worry. I'm not going to molt."

"It's *you*."

"You know me?"

He exhaled. "We met a few years back."

Jonah shook his head, confused.

"It'll come to you. You saw that sign back there?"

"Yeah."

"You remember what it said?"

"Yes."

"Well, I'm Henry. I may have been slightly unrecognizable when we met. Had a beard, I think."

A man with his name on the town he lived in was possibly dictatorial. Jonah would tread carefully. He *was* familiar, though. His personality, maybe; he was a lot like those assholes in charge of him when he was in the military . . .

"The man on the road! The one who shot in my direction."

"I didn't *hit* you."

The armed men behind Henry laughed.

"Yeah," Jonah said. "I remember. You'd come from Paris."

"Good memory. What was Heike doing when you found her?"

"It looked like she was playing some sort of game."

"Adventurous little thing. Takes off on her own sometimes. Isn't aware of the danger she's in." Henry spoke to the men behind him. "If it happens again, you'll be replaced." Henry focused down at Jonah. "You were headed here, you said?"

"I understand you have someone in this town who saw a television broadcast?"

Henry studied him, and Jonah wondered what he was thinking. He was a stark contrast to the man he'd met on the road. He no longer looked disheveled and tired, and he'd lost a ton of weight. This town had obviously changed him.

"Walk with me," Henry said. "It's fine."

The men behind him relaxed their grip on their rifles as Jonah followed Henry away from them.

"I'm sorry you're alone," Henry said.

Jonah felt a sharp tug at his insides. "Me too."

"The man you're looking for is our town doctor, Sven. Most of the people here speak English. Ask your questions of him, or the others. Stay a few days, I owe you that much, but then I want you to leave." He pointed. "This here's a family town."

Jonah looked at the Behemoth heads, considering what it must have taken to get them, and wondered just what Henry meant by that. "I understand.

Thank you. I just want some answers."

"Don't we all? I see you have guns. I'll ask that you leave them at our armory while you're with us. OK?"

"OK."

"We've got a good thing going on here. Don't make trouble. You cause any, and I'll kill you. Understand?"

"Yes."

"I'm not joking."

"I didn't think you were."

"What's your name?"

That was a good sign. Henry was tough, but Jonah thought most of it was only posturing. "Jonah."

"Come on then, Jonah."

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CHAPTER 27

Most nodded politely, forced a smile, or shook Jonah's hand as Henry introduced him, but Jonah sensed apprehension, and rightly so. Someone new could be dangerous, or could lead Molters to where the townspeople were if they'd been hunting him.

Jonah looked over the town. The homes were closely built, like an old Western town from America. Solar panels were on most rooftops, and chimneys lofted smoke from the fires that warmed from within. He saw picnic tables placed at the center of town before they ducked into a cabin.

Inside was the armorer. He was cleaning gun parts on the counter. Behind him were various guns on racks: bolt-action rifles, pump-action shotguns, semiautomatic shotguns, automatic pistols, revolvers; aside from quite a few Russian assault rifles and automatic rifles, they were almost all civilian weapons.

Then Jonah recognized the crates Henry had when they'd first met on the road. They had eight of them now. One of the tops was off, and he could see piles of grenades inside. It looked as if many crates had been combined into only a few. *Quite the arsenal.*

"Jacques," Henry said, "this is Jonah."

Jacques looked up at them. "Ah, I get to practice my English."

"*Ich spreche Deutsch*," Jonah said.

"That's nice. Not very well, though. Contribute or borrow?"

Jonah shook his head. He didn't understand.

Jacques put the gun parts down and leaned both hands on the counter. "I'm sure you've noticed you're in an armory—"

"*Safeguard* and borrow," Henry said. "Jonah, you'll leave your guns here."

Jonah passed them over to Jacques, who took them and lined them up neatly on the counter, barrels pointed toward the back of the room.

"Until he leaves," Henry said.

"And when will that be?" Jacques said.

"That's to be determined."

"By you, of course. Where did he come from? How do you know him?"

"From the road. From before."

"That makes him trustworthy?"

Henry's face flushed red. "Don't worry about it."

"Worry keeps us alive. Who is he?" Jacques's attention went to Jonah. "Who are you?"

"I'm just here to introduce him," Henry said. "Not for you to interrogate him. Just do your damn job."

The two men stared each other down. They clearly didn't like each other that much, and their argument was about to escalate.

Jonah held up a hand. "It's fine, Henry. He can ask whatever he wants. Almost forgot." Jonah went to unbuckle his belt to take off his machete.

"Go ahead and hang on to that," Henry said.

"OK."

Jacques's glare went from Henry to Jonah. "All men have purposes. What is yours?"

"To find answers."

"Yes, we all want such things. But a man with no job is a useless man. I'm sure you *both* agree."

Jonah heard Henry exhale, trying to calm himself down.

"You will help out while you are here, yes?" Jacques said.

"Whatever you need."

"*Whatever you need*, he says. You need answers? I know some things. Why don't you ask me what you want to know?"

Henry's irritation flared up again. "He's not here to talk to you."

"Who then?"

"Sven . . . *Just* give him a pistol and get this over with."

Jacques eyed Henry, irritation of his own flashing, but begrudgingly passed over a 9mm pistol, obviously growing tired of the conversation as well.

"Thank you," Jonah said.

Jonah didn't really understand why he had to give over his guns in exchange for a less powerful one. It must have been necessary in some way Jonah wasn't going to ask about today. To show trust possibly, or maybe Henry simply didn't want everyone to walk around armed—especially someone no one knew very well. Henry's town, his rules, it seemed.

"You can return it to collect your guns before you leave," Henry said.

Jonah saw Jacques smile at that.

"All right," Henry said. "We're going." He turned to leave but stopped. "Sorry I snapped at you, Jacques. It's been a long day."

Jacques waved his hand. "That's all right. For me too."

"Nice to meet you," Jonah said, mustering a grin.

Jacques went back to cleaning the gun parts. "You too, American. Make sure you take care of that gun."

"I will."

"I like him most of the time, but it's been the same people in this town for so long," Henry said. "Which is a good thing, I know, compared to other places."

"Same way it is in the military sometimes," Jonah said. "Funny how you occasionally need to get away from the people you like."

"Ain't that the truth. You were in the military?"

"I was."

"For how long?"

"A few years."

"You go to war?"

"Yeah."

"A good soldier can lead or take orders. Do you agree?"

"Yes, I do," Jonah said. "How do you know that? Were you—"

"No, my dad was a retired colonel. He told me. That's good to know, Jonah. If you need something to eat, the kitchen's in here."

Henry opened a door to a house, and inside was a cook busily preparing meals. There were square tables and chairs. The place was set up like a diner.

"That's Bernard," Henry said.

Bernard waved, and Jonah held up a hand. Bernard was a heavy man and looked like he never hesitated to taste what he was cooking. There was a plate of steaming meat on the counter with two forks on it.

Henry picked one up. "How'd you know we were coming?"

Bernard pointed two fingers at his eyes and then one toward Henry, something Jonah had seen soldiers do a thousand times. "Go ahead," he said. "Try it."

Jonah took a bite too. It was delicious. "How did you get so much meat?"

Henry and Bernard smiled and glanced at each other.

Jonah thought back to the fences. "This isn't Behemoth, is it?"

Henry chuckled. "No!"

Bernard winced. "Come, come, American."

"We raise our own food," Henry said. "We have pigs, chickens, and even a few rabbits."

"A few? That's understating it." Bernard wiped his hands on his apron, eyeing Jonah and grinning. "I can practice my English now."

"This guy too, huh?" Jonah said. "*Ich spreche Deutsch*."

"So do we," he said, and chuckled.

"*Wie lange haben Sie ein Koch gewesen?*"

"How long have I been a cook? Ah, an impasse." Bernard pointed at Jonah. "He keeps speaking Deutsch. I like this guy. Hey, American, we are in Deutschland, so we all speak Deutsch. What fun is it to speak Deutsch in Deutschland? Henry, tell this guy to speak English."

"Tell him yourself," Henry said.

"Hey, American, speak English! Come on, *English! English!*"

"What about Henry?"

"That's more like it. Talk to him? Nah! He's too stubborn. He doesn't say much anyway. I want to talk more than he does. I'll show you. Hey, you, Henry, you talk much?"

Henry was stone-faced. "When I have something to say."

Bernard rolled his eyes. "All you Americans, strong-willed types."

"You mean silent types," Henry said.

Bernard flipped him off.

"You just said you wanted me to talk more. I'm talkin'."

"You talk too much."

"How are we helping you if we let you say something wrong? And for a

guy who wants to practice English, he sure speaks it well."

Bernard considered this, turning to stir a steaming pot. He nodded over and over, mulling over his thoughts, and then flipped Henry off again.

"Asshole," Henry said.

Jonah finished his plate. "Delicious. I really needed that. Thank you very much."

"You're welcome," Bernard said. "Wait until you taste—"

"He's not staying," Henry said.

"Oh," Bernard said. "We'll see about that. I've known you a long time. I can tell you like him already."

"Get back to work."

"I'm always working! You can eat here for breakfast, lunch, and dinner if you like."

"Thank you," Jonah said. "You'll be seeing me in here again soon. It was nice to meet you."

Bernard stirred the pot. "You too."

Outside, Heike's mother approached, staring at Jonah. She seemed very grateful, but Jonah also sensed a little more than that. As she looked him up and down, Jonah felt a familiar pull. She was very pretty.

"This is Doreen," Henry said. "Heike's mother."

Jonah shook her hand. "*Freut mich dich kennenzulernen*."

"She speaks English. Doreen?"

"Yes, I do. Nice to meet you too."

Jonah and Doreen were still shaking hands. Henry glanced down at their endless greeting and then back to Jonah.

"Heike! Not so close!" Doreen yanked her hand away and ran over to the entrance gate.

Even though Jonah couldn't hear, it looked like Heike was trying to explain to her mom that she wasn't going to go out the gate but only play near it, but Doreen was being overprotective and still scolding her. Considering how things could have gone, it was understandable.

"Good mom," Henry said. "Thank you for bringing Heike back."

"You're welcome," Jonah said. "About this doctor?"

"Sven? He's a little kooky. Has lots of ideas . . ."

Jonah recognized something about Henry, a trait he'd seen before. He obviously didn't quite understand the man he was about to introduce Jonah to. Sometimes people were concrete thinkers, and for them it was as if those who thought outside the box were speaking a different language. Ironically, someone like Henry often had the best outlook of extreme circumstances because these people didn't have the imagination to be bewildered or rattled. They just accepted whatever was going on without shaming themselves with

introspection.

Jonah had an imagination, but he was also a trained soldier, so he could allow himself to interpret events beyond what they meant, but in a realistic manner. For him he felt that all of his emotions should run their course, but he sealed off in appropriate, controlled arenas in his mind.

Unless he let himself go, which he did sometimes when he was weak, when he allowed his depression to bleed through. Or especially when he wanted to feel normal, like when he was among his friends and drunk, something likely to never happen again. He sure needed it to, though, only somehow without the resurgence of his dependence on alcohol, but that was impossible.

Again Jonah was reminded of those he'd lost, but he dismissed the thought of them. He couldn't think of them now. This doctor he was about to meet was precisely whom he needed to speak with, and this was the mission that needed to be his focus.

"This way," Henry said.

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CHAPTER 28

Henry gently rapped his large knuckles on the outside of the open door. "Doc?" He opened it, and they went inside.

The place clearly hadn't been a doctor's office originally, but it had been made into one. There was a well-kept desk, filing cabinets, even clipboards to fill out personal information. Most of the houses had fires burning. This one didn't, but the man behind the desk didn't seem to notice the cold. There was a hooded coat hanging over the chair he sat on. He was a thin man and had a receding hairline. Overall, he seemed frail. He had dark bags under his eyes from a lack of sleep.

"Sven, this man has some questions for you. You busy?"

"Of course I am," he said, standing up and walking around his desk with a smile. They shook hands.

"I'm Jonah."

"What, no Deutsch? You Americans think everybody speaks English. All you have to do is *attempt* the language and we will try to help."

"*Ich spreche Deu*—"

"*Nein, nein, nein.* Too late, American. English is what we'll speak. For you," he said, looking at Henry. "For all of you."

"I give up," Jonah said.

"Did you make an appointment?" Sven said.

"Well, no," Jonah said. "I thought—"

Sven waved a hand. "I'm only testing your sense of humor. Test failed."

"I'm a little short on humor these days."

Sven *tsk*-ed. "Humor is something none of us can afford to lose."

Jonah forced a smile. "You're probably right."

"I know I am."

"I heard you saw one of the last TV broadcasts?"

He folded his arms. "One of them, I'm sure. Where did you hear that?"

"From some men in a nearby town."

Sven smiled. "Former soldiers?"

"Yeah."

"Those fuckers."

"They weren't too bad."

"That's because they were all American, like you."

"How many of them were there?" Henry said.

"Three," Jonah said.

"Only three?"

Henry and Sven exchanged glances; not as many as they had expected.

"You were a soldier too, I think," Sven said.

"Yes," Jonah said. "I was."

"You Americans bond and all that shit?"

"We did."

"It's a shame what happened to their town," Sven said. "A beautiful place."

"I noticed," Jonah said.

Henry dropped a large hand on Jonah's shoulder. "I've got things to do. I'll leave you guys to it."

"Thank you," Jonah said.

Henry left. Outside he yelled something at somebody, but Jonah couldn't make out what.

"Have a seat," Sven said. "It was Jonah, right?"

"Right," he said, and sat.

Sven went back and sat behind his desk. He raised a hand curtly. "*Questions*, American."

Sven masked his impatience with a quick grin, but his intense eyes gave him away. He looked put out, which was understandable. He obviously had a lot to do, being the town doctor. Jonah also wanted to ask about all that that entailed, but considering Sven was the only doctor, Jonah had no doubt there were many responsibilities that fell on his shoulders.

"You saw a television broadcast?"

"Yes. It was brief. It discussed missing family members, sightings of the creatures all over Europe."

"Any mention of America?"

"Not during that broadcast."

"What else?"

"All kinds of rumors were being discussed, including one that is true. That they don't care for the cold."

"No, they don't," Jonah said. *Great. Already knew all that.* Jonah cleared his throat and coughed. "Sorry. I quit smoking."

"Recently?"

"Yeah. Wait, what year is it?"

Sven grinned. "Decided to do that myself. Smoked nearly . . . no, over thirty years. The time, it goes by so fast."

"A friend once asked me where I thought Molters came from. I didn't think it mattered then, but since then I've thought about it more and more."

"And?"

"Now I think it does. What do you think?"

"Where does anything come from? Where do we come from? Where do other predators come from? Does it change anything? You were right to not care about that initially. It doesn't matter."

"That was only because, as a soldier we're trained to deal with one aspect of a mission at a time . . . Never mind."

"They're here, and now we're forced to deal with them. People have to deal with all kinds of opposition on a daily basis, mostly from one another. Some more, some less. That includes animals that can kill us."

"Humor me," Jonah said.

"You're asking me if I think they have an origin, a place where they were essentially born?"

"Yes."

"Impossible to tell, as far as I'm concerned. And irrelevant. It isn't just you that is obsessed with where they came from, my American friend, it's everyone it seems, but I don't think it matters. I have my own opinions—"

"That's what I was hoping to hear. I'm not obsessed. Well, maybe in a way, but it's more than that. The more I know about the enemy, the more efficiently I can kill it."

"You are a soldier on a mission. That I understand. There's more of us and less of them. To save ourselves, we kill them. Every last one of them."

"Yes, but if there are any of them left, then there is still the possibility of infection, and this can start all over again."

"Infection. That's appropriately apt. That description I've thought of too, but realistically I'd say what they do is closer to a fertilization. I tried to rename the Infectors, but it caused too much confusion. Names stick."

"That's exactly why I'm here. I want to know what someone like you, someone who's thought about this as much as I have, where you think—"

"Yes, yes. I'll get to that. It doesn't seem to me it's possible that anyone has thought about them more than you."

Jonah grinned.

"To address what you said before, though, there's always the possibility of infection, as you say. It doesn't mean that it has to be worldwide, which is where this is going if it hasn't already. If it is isolated to certain areas, then we can control it, as we've done with something like disease in the past. And if it is beasts that threaten us, mostly they're isolated to a landmass and controllable by avoiding their territory. Whichever it is, with them, I think we just have to eliminate them until they are no longer a threat."

"What else do you know?"

"I'm not sure I *know* anything."

"Tell me what you *think*. Please."

"Stubborn, aren't you?" Sven leaned back in his chair, as if considering his own thoughts. Then he leaned forward again. "I only have speculations, you understand, but the one that makes the most sense to me is a virus."

"I don't understand. Why balk at their description of an infection, then?"

"Because I believe they've moved far past that. *I personally think* that their closest relative is something similar to a cold or the flu. What people forget about this planet is that it is a constant, microscopic battleground involving organisms that are trying to kill us and one another, every moment of every day, and that even compete with us while they're trying to replace us at the top of the food chain. Whether they are conscious of this drive, I doubt, but it doesn't matter, because it is happening."

Sven leaned back again, this time even farther. Jonah thought his chair might fall backward, except he'd undoubtedly done this before, and many

times.

"It's possible that one of these bugs succeeded by evolving and evolving and eventually, where it was once a virus or bacteria, they are now large like us. I think it got strong enough, evolved greatly, obviously, to the point that it could infect another organism to where it became that organism . . . and then it simply spread."

A sickening thought. Jonah swallowed. "What about the Behemoths?"

"What about them? We think they're nocturnal—"

"But humans aren't," Jonah interrupted. "Sorry."

Sven smiled politely.

Jonah finished his thought. "I thought that if predators are nocturnal, it's because that's when their prey is active."

"Not always. Usually it's because their prey doesn't have the heightened senses they do, and in turn that is when it is best for them to hunt."

"Could it be said that a predator that hunts when its prey is inactive is a more evolved one?"

"Perhaps. I'd agree they're nocturnal because we humans sleep at night and their main prey is us. Plus we don't see well at night, and they obviously do. It's as simple as that. I don't know if other predators are more effective hunters and killers than them or not. Maybe they're smart enough to know when we're the most vulnerable. What are you getting at?"

"How different they are from other predators. How evolved they are. Not to say they aren't a primitive life form, but their life cycle certainly doesn't leave much room on this planet for humans."

"No," Sven said. "It doesn't."

"You were saying? About the Behemoths?"

"Similar to a bee queen. It's possible they are predetermined or selected genetic heirs to a throne. Behemoths can infect a potential host with a stinger in their tails up to a certain maturity, but after they become adults, that stinger loses that ability for some reason, and then it becomes a weapon. Once their stinger is no longer infectious, they begin to secrete Infectors, and then the Infectors are born from them every few days until the Behemoth is dead. Infectors hunt down hosts. Infectors die after one infection. Infected humans molt. Molters feed on prey. They cocoon and then liquefy to be food for the Behemoths. Molters can produce Behemoth spores where there are none."

"What? You know that for sure?"

"I do. Unfortunately, I do. I saw one split open in front of me. I thought they were Infectors at first because I thought that they had to be, but Infectors look nothing like Behemoths."

"No, they don't. So they must cocoon themselves?"

"I've never seen that part, but it makes sense to me. Internally, I think, in some disgusting way I could only guess. The small ones went in every direction with no interest in me and were so fast it made me laugh. I suspect Behemoth spores feed like a Molter and grow until they reach a point where

they cocoon. Then their final growth spurt begins, the stage most of us have seen. While the Behemoth grows, Infectors multiply, emerging from the Behemoth's flesh, and swim within the sticky goop inside that cocoon with them. As it gets bigger, the cocoon lowers under its own weight, and then the Behemoth inside is born to the world, and with it Infectors also that scurry away to hunt down human hosts. Ideally children."

Jonah didn't know that. Initially Jonah thought that children were neutral, that the Molters wouldn't feed on them because he'd crossed paths with children everywhere at first. They'd often chase him as he drove past. Some had become quite feral.

What he eventually realized was that the Molters could tell their age and obviously their size, and for that reason they weren't interested in them. As long as there were full-grown adults around, that is. When there weren't, apparently children were as susceptible as everyone else. It made sense because he didn't see them much anymore.

"Children are ideal newborn Molters," Sven said with disgust. "They aren't as large as one from a full-grown adult, but just as strong as any of them. You probably noticed you haven't seen many children?"

"No, I haven't. So which came first, the Molter or the Behemoth?"

Sven smiled, shrugging his shoulders. "Come outside with me. I need to stand."

They stood just outside Sven's office. Sven smoked a cigarette.

"I thought you quit?" Jonah said.

"I did. You want one?"

"No, thanks. You know it's pretty much impossible to quit if you still have them around."

"*Yes, yes,* I know. I don't know you well enough for you to lecture me. I get enough of that from Henry." Sven blew smoke. "I've sought out others for information as you have. I'm not completely sure about everything I've told you, but very damn sure. You and I, still being alive, and you facing as many of them as I suspect you have, makes us the experts, I think."

Jonah wouldn't go that far, but he had fought the Molters and looked them in the eye while he did it. It wasn't intelligence that stared back at him. As far as he could tell, they weren't self-aware and also were not capable of cognitive thought, just pure brutal instinct. This theory about their evolution was simply that they were parasites that overpowered humans with their strength. Jonah wondered why the next evolution, something that could possibly replace humans, was a step backward, but realized his perspective was biased. From nature's perspective, perhaps Molters were the ones who were superior. Even so, as history had taught, no species lived forever.

Sven blew a smoke ring. "You have a thought?"

"If they are categorically similar to a virus or whatever, or something like it, could there possibly be a cure?"

"I've wondered that myself. There must be, but I think it's appropriate to think of them as just another animal in the food chain, as I alluded to earlier, similar to a lion or bear, a shark, or a deadly virus. There are many things that try to kill us daily, and those ones are just as capable of bloodshed, or even more, than these creatures. Perhaps we should simply accept their existence, just as we accept other predators as a species. Learn to deal with them, fight them when we have to, which, like them, could and would kill us."

"Except lions aren't actively hunting us down. They aren't a direct threat to human existence. Molters are."

"But they were once."

"Not to the entire species as a whole."

"Yes, they were. Many predators threatened early man, but man learned to adapt. We find a way to live with each and every threat. We just happen to be forced to live right where this current threat is. So the only cure, so to speak, as I've said, is to simply hunt them down and kill them. There will always be other life forms vying for our place on this planet. After the Molters it will be something else."

They were both silent, contemplating.

"Then sometimes I think differently," Sven said. "Maybe killing them wouldn't be best. Maybe they serve some purpose we are not yet aware of. Occasionally it's best to change our perspective on such matters. Regardless of different opinions, they aren't going to prevent me from how I want to live my life. Looking back at our history, do you think we're prepared for another adversary? Yes, we are. We always are. Do not discount the resilience of human beings."

It was a valid point. "If they have spread to other countries, how do you think it's happened?"

"That I don't know. There are all kinds of ways, but I think it must be a way we aren't aware of. Yet."

"Maybe there are others around who know more than we do. Maybe we should seek them out."

Sven patted Jonah on the back. "Yes. Another fine mission for a soldier."

Jonah smiled. "I noticed the heads on the fences."

"I was wondering when you'd get around to asking about those," Sven said proudly.

"How is it that you killed so many? Does that have something to do with how your people have survived for so long?"

Sven hesitated. "We've talked enough. We're heading out again soon. I believe it would be best if we just show you."

"Show me what?"

Sven's brow lifted excitedly. He dropped his cigarette butt, which had burned out without him noticing, and stepped on it. "Ah!" He bent over and

picked it back up. “You have a gun?”

“I got a pistol from the armory, and I have a machete.”

“Bring them.”

“Will I need something more powerful?”

“*Naw*,” he said. “We’re professionals.”

“Professional what?”

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CHAPTER 29

The drivers—Henry, Bernard, Jacques, and Sven—started up the trucks. Jonah got in the one Sven drove. Other men piled into the truck beds armed to the teeth. The townsfolk cleared out of the way. There was only so much time left before nightfall. Jonah was sure they had to accomplish whatever they'd planned before then, hence the speed.

The four trucks took a right onto the main, icy road, and since all were four-wheeled drive and had studded tires, they reached excessive speeds quickly. All of them seemed to be enjoying themselves, as if they'd all done what they were about to do numerous times and it was fun for them. They were used to it.

"Where are we headed?" Jonah said to Sven. "Somewhere before dark?"

"We'll need darkness for what we're about to do. Do you trust me?"

"I just met you. Of course I don't."

Sven guffawed.

"Shouldn't you stay behind, being the town doctor and all?"

"I'm not just a doctor. I'm an *adrenaline junkie* like you Americans."

"We're not all the same."

"Yes, sure."

Sven drove at an excessive speed, as if he'd done it a million times. He knew each curve and where the potholes most likely were—he avoided places under the snow that Jonah couldn't see—and rode the ass of the truck in front of him.

"Tell me what we're after?" Jonah said.

"I'll tell you why first. We discovered something about them that keeps Molters away."

"What?"

"Their own kind rotting. It repels them. Until they decompose completely, that is. Fortunately, the cold keeps them intact longer."

He was talking about the heads and entrails on the fences back at Henrytown.

"Holy shit," Jonah said. "We're hunting Behemoths?"

The trucks turned and barreled down a side road at breakneck speeds. The driver of each truck handled the terrain as a professional would. Considering how many times they'd likely done this, technically they were professionals.

"They're incredibly difficult to kill," Jonah said. "How do you do it?"

Night had fallen. The trucks stopped and backed up on both sides of a set of train tracks. Two men moved into the tunnel. Jonah could see their flashlights flip on and get dimmer the deeper they headed into the darkness. They looked like jittery fireflies in the gloom.

“Are you serious?” Jonah said. “How do you know it’s in there?”

“We hunt them. Track them, however you call it. We’ve had eyes on this one for a while now.”

The flashlights suddenly got brighter and much more erratic. The truck they’d jumped out of backed down the train tracks, toward the mouth of the tunnel. The men appeared, running as fast as they could, and right behind them was a Behemoth.

The men leaped into the truck bed, and its tires chewed up snowy earth as it took off.

Sven put the truck in gear and hit the gas. “Hang on!”

Jonah saw all of the trucks take off together. “Where are we going?”

The trucks stayed ahead of the enraged Behemoth, but it was a full-grown adult, and it considered them invaders of its territory. The trucks were going fifty kilometers per hour, and the Behemoth was still keeping up with them.

Sven’s truck was the lead vehicle and made a quick right turn.

Jonah was jarred, nearly bouncing his head off the window. “A little warning next time?”

“You might want to grab that handle,” Sven said. “The ‘oh, shit’ handle, right?”

Jonah reached up and grasped it. “Right.”

The trucks sped down a narrower road just as fast as they had traveled on the main one. Jonah couldn’t believe the speeds they were reaching—and also how they hadn’t been in any accidents tonight. He was about to bring that up when the trucks suddenly took a hard left.

Jonah looked behind them. The Behemoth wasn’t there. “It’s gone.”

“Just wait.”

The trucks stopped. Engines revved, chugging hot exhaust into the cold.

Jonah heard a *crack* as a tree branch broke, and the Behemoth appeared, only it wasn’t the same one that had chased them from the train tunnel. It was another one, which was obvious from its larger size.

“I hope you planned this,” Jonah said.

“Get out.”

Sven and Jonah got out of the truck; the others did as well. All of them readied their guns. Jonah thought that this might be to protect themselves against the Behemoths, but it wasn’t. The Behemoths seemed to be completely unaware of them.

As both broke through the trees to get to the other, the Behemoths sized each other up from a distance, bellowing. All their legs splayed out and stretched as far as possible as they tried to intimidate each other. The new Behemoth was the largest Jonah had ever seen, even bigger than the first one he’d killed.

The Behemoths’ heads and necks twisted distortedly. The contortion seemed to be caused by the thunderous, ground-shaking roars both made at each other.

A gunshot blasted through the night, and both Behemoths suddenly looked at the humans who were aiming guns all around them.

The Behemoths' distraction was brief, and soon after they couldn't be more disinterested. They rushed each other, their many legs propelling them forward, and they crashed like two freight trains on the same track at top speed. They bit and grappled with their legs for dominance, and as this was happening, they looked like one giant Behemoth. It was nearly impossible to tell where one began and the other ended.

They tried to hook each other's legs, to try and break them, to get the other on the ground to maul it. It was dangerous for anything unfortunate enough to wind up in their path, including the trees that snapped like twigs in their wake.

The smaller one's claws stomped into the ground for grip as it tried to overpower the larger Behemoth, which was trying to climb on top of it, creating large plumes of powdery snow. If the larger one got the smaller one on the ground, it would be over. The smaller one lifted the larger one up and nearly threw it over on its side, but it broke away.

The Behemoths reared back to spot an advantage. They hissed, looking for openings to bite, break each other's legs, haul each other down, and tear each other apart. Gunfire rang out as the two battles happened simultaneously.

Jonah heard someone yell, "Clear!" in a gruff shout. It was Henry. They must have already killed most of the Molters.

By the time Jonah's attention had gone back to the Behemoth battle, he saw that the smaller one, the one from the train tunnel, had ripped into the larger one with its teeth. The larger one let out a thunderous moan, spewing gooey blood everywhere, and the smaller Behemoth proceeded to pull it apart.

After it was dead, the remaining Behemoth focused its attention on the humans aiming their guns, and faced them. A prideful roar shook the ground. It displayed its legs outward to show its dominance.

"Fire!" Henry yelled.

The men all shot at once, and the Behemoth rushed forward, but a well-tossed grenade exploded in front of it, and the blast and shrapnel stunned it. It moved from side to side as if it weren't sure where to go next. It had obviously lost interest in the fight altogether. It was blind from the grenade blast, and blood oozed from its face.

The men moved closer, aiming together, and the wave of head shots killed it. The victorious Behemoth slumped over in defeat, suddenly looking much smaller as it folded onto itself, the way a spider looked after it was dead.

"That's one way to do it," Jonah said.

Sven smiled. "Saves some ammo."

Jonah pulled his machete. "And lives, I bet."

He and the others went to the Behemoth corpses to chop them up. After they'd reduced the monsters into manageable pieces, they loaded all of the parts, and the dead Molters, into the truck beds.

The trip home wasn't nearly as fast. In fact, it was slow, even though it was night, as if the drivers didn't have a care in the world.

"How did you guys know?" Jonah said.

"Henry."

"How's that?"

"He used to hunt the Behemoths down. He had one behind him—he was being chased, apparently—and he crossed paths with another one. The two Behemoths ignored him completely and killed each other. Henry said it was as if he didn't exist."

Jonah had seen that with his own eyes. It was only after one of them was dead that the surviving Behemoth went for the humans. "Territorial."

"Yes. Henry was exhausted, and after what had happened, he suspected it was the safest place for him to be and decided to stay the night. He didn't know how right he was. The Molters stayed away for days with the stench of death in the area. The remains rotted quickly, but I think Henry said it was three days before he saw another Molter."

"How long do you think this can go on?"

Sven thought for a minute. "I don't know."

"What happens if it stops working?"

"I don't know why it would. Maybe you should talk to Henry about that."

The folks of Henrytown were confident in the strategy. That was fine, but Jonah knew all about complacency. "You did look like professionals."

"I told you! We haven't lost anybody doing it yet. All we have to do is get the Behemoths to sniff each other out, and then we sit back, aside from handling the few Molters that show up to protect them. Watching those monsters tear each other apart has become our entertainment."

"Each Behemoth can be linked to quite a few Molters."

"Yes, but we're expecting them."

"How do you safely find Behemoths?"

"We send people out, those who are skilled at driving fast. Locating them can be tough, and it has to be coordinated, but we're getting better at it."

"It was quite a fight."

"What's interesting is that the bigger ones don't always win. Like with humans, strategy is everything. It's extremely dangerous, though, and we give them their space. Behemoths will destroy everything in their path, including the Molters that serve them. I've seen it happen. They looked confused before they got squashed."

Sven downshifted.

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CHAPTER 30

Men stood guard, watching for Molters as the Behemoth parts and entrails—which still steamed—were used to cover the outside fences. The last truck pulled into town, and Jonah saw the men lower the tailgate and yank cocooned Molters out onto the snow.

"From the train tunnel," Henry said.

Jonah nodded, thinking about how many people a Molter had to kill in order to become a cocoon—at least three or four. He forcibly banished the sickening thought from his mind. The cocoons ripped open when they were laid atop the razor-sharp barbed wire; their gooey contents slathered down and dripped.

Henry squeezed the last drops of ooze from some Behemoth guts at the fence base. "Before it freezes. We gotta use it up."

"What happens during the summer?" Jonah said.

"Well . . . it gets a little ripe around here."

Bernard chortled. "A *little*?"

"Henry," Jonah said, "can I speak with you alone?"

Jonah's tone made Henry look over at him, and then he stuffed the squished guts into the fence itself. "Sure."

They passed through the gate and walked toward the center of town.

"You're all in danger," Jonah said.

"No shit."

"I don't mean from Molters. I mean from what you're doing here." Jonah knew he had to tread lightly. Henry was the kind of man who had a lot of pride. "Living normally leaves you exposed."

Henry scoffed. "'Normally'? This is nothing close to normal. Start making sense!"

"Even in the most dangerous situations, you have to stay focused."

"What are you getting at? I've been fighting these things for a long time now, same as you. We've all—"

"I'm not trying to piss you off, but living this way is extremely dangerous."

"You've only been here a day. You don't know what you're talking about. Who am I to tell folks how to live their lives?"

"As the leader of this town—"

"I'm *not* the leader of this town."

"Your name's on this town."

Henry reddened. "That's not my doing!"

"When we met you pointed out—"

"I said that to intimidate you before I knew you weren't the type that needed to be intimidated."

Jonah brushed a hand over the town. "They all think of you as the leader. I heard the way you talked to Jacques, and I saw the way he regarded you."

"Hey! I just know what needs to be done."

"If everyone voted, who do you think they'd say—"

"All right, all right." Henry exhaled angrily. "Go on."

"I've been in a war zone. I know how situations can go to shit fast and for reasons nobody could have guessed. We need to be cautious, no matter how safe everything seems."

Henry gestured his thumb behind him. "What do you call that? How can we do better? Tell me."

"If shortcuts work, then they work. But for how long?"

"That's not a shortcut!" His voice boomed. Others looked in their direction. "Are you kidding me? What that is, is extremely dangerous."

Jonah raised his hands. "I didn't mean it that way. I just know how people are once they're comfortable. When I was in the war, I would take my armored plates out of my flak vest because I was more comfortable being twenty pounds lighter. Thankfully, I never got shot."

Henry stared at him. "I get what you're saying. I know all about complacency, and I appreciate your intent. I do, but what are we supposed to do, never leave the safety of our fences, waiting for them to attack constantly? Miss out on living? Whatever's down the road is inevitable, and we'll deal with it. Until then we're going to live our lives how we want. Thank you for your concern." He reached down and patted Jonah on the shoulder.

"Sometimes we need to be reminded," Jonah said.

"I wasn't completely honest with you when we first met," Henry said. "That day on the road. I could tell how desperate you were, but I didn't want to help you. Didn't want to help anybody. I got sick of it. Didn't understand the Molters' life cycle then, and didn't want you following me either."

"Why are you telling me this?" Jonah said.

"The only reason I let you into our town was because of that day. I always regretted it. I *wished* I would have helped you."

"I understand."

Henry looked down at him. "Do you?"

"Yeah. I figured you'd end up . . . you'd be . . ."

"What? Alone? Seclusion does things to a man. Don't you think?"

"I do."

"Looks like we've both come a long way."

The others continued to cover the fences with remains from the enemy.

"I have guns," Jonah said. "I could go get them, bring them here."

Henry furrowed his brow, back to being the leader who he was. "How easy would it be to access them?"

"Not too much trouble if I had another vehicle to load into."

"How far away are they?"

"A few miles."

"Two or ten?"

"Around ten, maybe a little farther. Less than twenty, I'd say."

"How much do you have?"

“Quite a bit.”

“How do you know they’re still where you put them?”

“Because the truck they’re in is buried under the snow, and I’m the only one who knows where it is.”

Henry pursed his lips thoughtfully. “Go ahead and wait on that. A few miles in these conditions can be like a hundred.”

“Not the way you guys drive.”

Henry smiled. “That’s only because we know the area so well. We get beyond five miles or so and it’s a different story. We’re heading out in a while. Something we do regularly. I’d like you to go with us.”

“What’s the mission—or plan?”

“You can call it a mission if you want. There’s only so much civilian you can squeeze back into a soldier.”

Jonah smiled.

“We’re going down the road . . . to search.”

“For what?”

“Not what, who.”

Jonah’s smile was gone. “How long have they been missing?”

“Some a few months. Others, weeks. This town is about half of what it used to be.”

“Where are we going?”

“The surrounding area. A few miles out, no more.”

“Tonight?”

“No. First light. I’ll have you set up in the guesthouse down the street.”

“Thank you. I’ll get my gear ready and see you in the morning.”

“See you then,” Henry said.

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CHAPTER 31

Jonah was up and ready by the time Henry knocked on the guesthouse door. He looked surprised, then impressed, when Jonah opened it before the third knock.

"We'll take my truck," Henry said.

Normally Jonah would avoid going out unnecessarily, for anyone—the chances of finding somebody alive after being missing this long were infinitesimal—but Henry had that quality that made you want to follow him, like a few soldiers he'd known while he was in the military, and he never wanted to be somebody who squashed hope.

The truck Henry drove was the same one he had on the road when Jonah had first met him. It was perfect for this new world, practically a tank on wheels with plenty of room for people plus storage space in the back. Jonah glanced in the bed, curious to see if Henry still had all of those guns he'd seen. There were some, but not as many. He'd probably stored them in the armory or lost them during battles. Jonah had picked the same type of truck, the one he'd crashed and had to abandon.

Jonah opened the passenger door to find Doreen sitting in the middle. He had to take an extra breath. "Hi," he said.

She flashed him a smile. "Hi."

Jonah climbed into the heated cab and shut the door. It was too hot, actually. He'd been acclimated to the cold for so long. Henry got in the driver's side, jostling the entire truck with his weight.

"Mind if I crack the window?" Jonah said.

"Go ahead," Henry said. "No fresh snow last night. Roads are going to be icy. We'll drive slow today."

Jonah rolled the window down half an inch and settled into the seat. "Are you warm enough?" he said to Doreen. "I can roll it back up if you want."

"It's fine," Doreen said. "I'll let you know."

Jonah hadn't been this close to a woman in a long time. He was trying to remember when, but he couldn't. He wanted to ask Doreen something, anything. He opened his mouth to do just that but an alarm went off.

"My truck's mad at you," Henry said. "Put your seat belt on."

"Oh, right." Jonah grabbed the seat belt and pulled it across his body, touching Doreen's leg with the back of his hand. "Excuse me."

"You're excused."

As they pulled out onto the main road, Henry cracked his window too. "Hot in here."

Jonah felt Doreen looking at him, and he turned toward her and smiled. She was a beautiful woman. She had shoulder-length brown hair and wide-set, blue eyes. They had a lovely warmth, something rare in his life lately. He wondered why she'd come along. It felt like he was being set up with her, like on a date. Then he stupidly remembered why they'd headed out in the first

place.

Jonah rebooted to focus on the task at hand, except he choked on some spittle that sent him into a coughing jag.

Doreen patted him lightly on the back. “You OK?”

She was touching him. Jonah cleared his throat, feeling himself blush. It was so embarrassing. He put his face into his arm. “Yeah”—*cough*—“sorry.”

Cough.

Jonah inhaled slowly and finally, thankfully, exhaled without any more trouble. Doreen stifled a giggle.

That people were missing from town could mean many things, but it usually only meant one. Jonah didn’t want to mention that, though. There was no point. It was obvious. No doubt Henry and Doreen were close to them.

Jonah cleared his throat. “Anything I should know about the ones missing?”

Henry stared ahead as he drove. “They went out for a supply run but never came back.”

“What kind of supplies?”

“Food, water, tools. Anything useful from nearby abandoned homes.”

“Will we head to where we killed the Behemoths? Where they killed each other, I mean? Actually where one killed one and we killed the other?”

Doreen tittered.

“No, the opposite direction. We’ve covered most of that area already.”

“What if we encounter another Behemoth?”

“Not likely during the day, but if we do, then we’ll know which direction to head when we need more of them for the fences.”

“How many times have you been out searching?”

Henry looked over at Doreen. “We’ve gone out . . . what?”

“About ten times,” Doreen said.

“Luckily, we haven’t encountered any random Behemoths we weren’t already aware of. Unluckily, we haven’t found our people. There used to be more of us that went out to search, but they’ve given up. I haven’t. I can’t.” Henry looked over at Jonah. “I know what you’re thinking, but we have to try.”

“I’m just glad to help.”

They drove around random back roads and made small talk, trying to get their minds off of what they were doing there. When they went through random towns, looking for any sign of life—even the kind that violently took life away, like Molters—they found none. They even drove around the town Jonah had stayed at before going to Henrytown. He hoped that the Molters they’d killed there hadn’t been the people they were now searching for. Jonah didn’t mention that.

All in all, the outing was pleasant. The morning was crisp and refreshing, as winter could be, and the sun glinted off the icy snow. Doreen had been leaning her knee against Jonah's knee for about the last half hour and hadn't taken it away. There were ways women let men know when they were interested, and sometimes Jonah couldn't be sure when that was, but making excuses to touch him seemed like one of those ways.

It felt good to touch knees. It felt wonderful to be near Doreen, period. It was also nice to stay busy. Even though they were doing what they were doing, having something to do was essential for sanity, especially in a world full of those bloodthirsty creatures. Jonah hadn't felt his depression creep up since he'd arrived at Henrytown.

"How long has it been since we met on the road?" Jonah said.

Henry thought a moment. "Why?"

"When we met you spoke of changes. Not just the emergence of Molters, but the world too. I can feel it even more now. I think we all can."

"What's your point?"

"I'm just wondering what these changes mean."

"Sounds like you need to talk to Sven more."

Jonah chuckled. "Right."

Henry looked down at Jonah's and Doreen's touching knees. "Will it change how you live your life?"

Jonah glanced at Doreen. "No."

Henry shook his head. "Me either."

The rest of the drive was mostly in silence. Henry stopped and got out of the truck at random places to have a look at whatever had caught his interest, but instead of heading back to Henrytown, he would just get back in the truck and they'd drive more. They'd been out all day, and it was starting to get dark.

Jonah could sense Henry's impatience. He wanted to find his missing people very badly and actually thought he would. There was nothing that could be done, no other way for Jonah to help him other than being here, just quietly allowing him to try to figure out what had happened to them and where to go next.

Henry slammed the truck door. His brow was furrowed; he was obviously thinking about the people he was searching for but that were still missing. His tightly clenched teeth made his jaw visible even through his thick beard stubble. Without the commotion of the townsfolk getting ready to turn in for the night, Jonah might have heard his teeth grinding.

He really thinks he can still find them alive.

"You all set for sleep?" Henry said.

"Yes," Jonah said. "Thanks again."

"Thank *you*. All right, see you in the morning. Sleep well, Doreen."

"Thank you, Father. You too."

"*Father?*" Jonah said.

Henry gave him a half-smile as he left. Now it made sense. That was why Henry had come to this town. It was likely where he was headed when Jonah had met him on the road. He had been searching for his daughter. And granddaughter.

Doreen glanced up. "The stars are out."

Jonah looked up. No wonder it was so cold. Clear nights usually were. The stars were as bright as he'd ever seen, even with the lanterns around town. They sparkled brightly, and the longer Jonah and Doreen stared, the more stars appeared to them.

"It's pretty," he said.

They stood there a few minutes, two adults staring up at the sky, wanting to talk to each other but not sure how. Jonah could tell Doreen wanted him to say more to her, but Jonah didn't think it was the time or place considering where they'd just been, and why, and who she was: he had just found out she was the daughter of Henry, someone who could kick him out of this town and might still want him to leave.

"Good night," he said.

Saying it stung.

Doreen hesitated. "Good night."

Then she walked to her house.

Jonah took another glance up, a homesick feeling washing over him. Once again that sense of loneliness struck him, and then he turned and headed to the guesthouse.

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CHAPTER 32

Everyone seemed to be up already. Jonah had slept in. He hadn't done that in a long time; he hadn't been able to. His knowledge of danger only allowed him to sleep a few hours at a time and sometimes only a few hours throughout the night. He guessed his ease was because he felt safe here. Except he didn't like that feeling. The world wasn't safe.

The townsfolk milled about in their morning routines. A group speed-walked through town, most likely their daily exercise. They waved or smiled as they passed him, too immersed in their conversations to say hello. The truck hoods were all up, and their owners worked on them accordingly. They did that daily. The schedule of Henrytown reminded Jonah of the military.

Sven had a cigarette hanging out of his mouth as he examined an older woman's arm. She raised it and winced, then lowered it. There were still plenty of cigarettes if you knew where to find them, even if they were no longer being manufactured. That was because there weren't as many people left to smoke them.

Heike and another little girl chased each other. Doreen was chopping wood. Jonah thought about going over and asking her if he could help, but he saw only one ax, and Doreen seemed to be the type who did the chopping.

Jonah blew on his hands. The cold bit harder in the early morning, before the body got the chance to get used to the cold, especially after emerging from indoor warmth. Henry was talking to Bernard.

"He's awake," Bernard said. "I'll let my cooking take the credit."

"I'll gladly give it to you for more delicious meals from your kitchen," Jonah said.

"You don't look so tired," Henry said.

"I don't think I've slept that well in years. Anything I can do?"

"You *are* motivated," Henry said, and thought for a moment.

"I have to get back," Bernard said. "Breakfast is over, Jonah. Stop in for some lunch if you want. Spicy chicken today."

Jonah's mouth watered. "I will. Thank you."

"Spicy chicken?" Henry said. "I'll be there too."

"Give me until after noon," Bernard said. "Spread the word, please."

"I will," Henry said. "You could do a perimeter check," he said to Jonah, "considering your background. Check our defenses?"

"Alone?"

"Is that a problem?"

"No. Not at all. It's just that when I think 'mission,' I think a two-man team. It was drilled into me."

"I understand."

"How about a woman?" Doreen said from behind them.

They spun to see her walking up, and Jonah felt his stomach flutter.

"I'll practice my English," she said.

"*Ich spreche Deutsch*," Jonah said. *Everybody wants to speak English.*

When Doreen blushed Jonah realized he'd missed the hint.

"Yeah, sure, go ahead," Henry said. "I'll watch Heike."

Even though Jonah took the responsibility seriously, he was thrilled at the idea. Not just because he had a mission, but because it meant he'd be able to talk to Doreen, and he wanted to get to know her better. She was very attractive—nice too, and always seemed to be looking in his direction. Jonah thought it was because she was curious about him.

They borrowed guns from the armory—Jonah chose his shotgun, Doreen a bolt-action rifle—getting a wide-eyed look from Jacques that they ignored.

They passed Behemoth heads as they walked the fence. Large and still scary when beheaded, their faces were permanently scrunched in the pain of death, wrinkled and decayed, the horror of them far from what dwelt within Henrytown.

They walked close together. Jonah wanted to talk, to say a lot to her actually, but being in her presence was making him so nervous that he couldn't think of anything to say. He hadn't felt nervous around a woman in a long time.

"Have Molters been spotted lately?" he said. *Today's version of "Come here often"?*

"Yes," Doreen said, "but not very close."

"So *they*"—he motioned to the Behemoth heads—"really do work?"

"So far."

"What about Infectors?"

"They tend to only come around after a Behemoth birth. And there haven't been too many of those around here. We've been fortunate."

"What did you do in the army?" Jonah said.

Doreen gasped. "How did you know that? Who told you?"

"No one. I can just tell. Can't you?"

"Yes . . . I can."

"How many years were you in?"

"A few."

"What was your job?"

"Transportation."

That was all she said about it. Jonah understood operational security and respected it, even if he'd been kicked out of the military. So he didn't pry, even under these extreme circumstances that no longer related to how things used to be.

"What was *your* job?" she said.

"I was just a soldier."

"For how long?"

"A little over two years." Jonah looked over at her. Though he was nervous, it was the exciting kind of nervousness, and he was feeling as comfortable around her as if he'd known her his whole life. "I got kicked

out."

"For what?"

"Selling drugs."

"You were an addict?"

"No. Just a dumb kid."

"You needed extra money?"

"No, it wasn't that either."

"What then?"

"I'm not sure why I did it. Funny thing was that in the back of my mind, I thought I could do whatever I wanted, because I'd done so much in the war."

"You had to kill?"

"Yes."

"I'm sorry."

"I'm not."

"You don't regret being a soldier? Even after what happened to you?"

"What I did to myself, more like it. No. No way. That was after. I'm proud of what we did."

She didn't ask any more questions about that. Intricate details of what was done in a war zone weren't important. Soldiers knew not to push for personal information. Most of the time there would only be a push back. Jonah appreciated that Doreen was smart enough to understand that, even though he would have no problem telling her more. It felt good to be understood, especially by a woman.

And it felt incredible to be near her. Jonah could sense Doreen's attraction to him too, especially now that they'd been able to spend some one-on-one time together. How he felt toward her was a familiar pull for Jonah, and she naturally walked close to him. It was what a man and a woman did when they liked each other. Jonah remembered Daisy saying the men who liked her felt "dazed." Gil had been dazed. "He's so dazed," she'd say.

Well, that's how Jonah felt about Doreen—dazed. Plus Doreen looked at him like she saw a good man, and that was how she made him feel.

"Why are you smiling?" she said.

"I'm enjoying your company," Jonah said.

"Oh," she said, and blushed.

He wanted to put his arm around her. It was like his arm had a mind of its own, and he had to stop himself from moving it.

"You were stationed here?" she said.

"Not here, but here in Germany."

"That's what I meant. Is that why you are here? Before they . . . kicked you out?"

"No. I was here with friends. On holiday."

"Oh."

Jonah didn't want to talk about them. "Who was Heike's dad?"

"He was a soldier too."

"Where is he now?"

"He passed away."

"Is that where you met? In the army?"

"Yes."

"He died in combat?"

"No, vehicle accident. He never saw war."

"Did you love him?"

"He was my husband. I was pregnant. He was a good man."

Jonah took that as a no.

"What about you?" she said. "Do you have family where you're from?"

"Yes. My parents, an older brother, and two younger sisters. My sisters have two kids each. My older brother has four."

"Four?"

Jonah smiled, allowing himself to think of them, but then that formed a pit in his stomach.

"That's a lot of kids."

"Mm-hmm."

"Do you know where they are?"

"No."

Jonah had done his best to stop thinking of his parents and siblings and realized he hadn't thought of them lately. He didn't know where they were or even if they were alive, and even if they were, he was too far away to do anything about it. Most likely they were . . . He didn't want to think about them anymore.

"Were *you* ever married?" Doreen said.

Jonah felt like he'd been gut-kicked. "Yes. But we were young and we got divorced."

"How old were you when you were married?"

"Twenty."

"That is young."

"She was one of my friends I was here with."

"Oh."

He wasn't sure why he told her that part. They walked in silence for a while, and Jonah could tell Doreen was trying to understand his lifestyle.

"Why do you think Heike was so far from town?" Jonah said.

"It's been safe here. I think she's used to it and forgot how dangerous outside town can be."

That was hard for Jonah to imagine. The Behemoth heads and Molter parts were all over the fences. They were frightening, to say the least, but Heike was so young. When you're young what you see every day becomes normal, maybe even monsters. And there are all kinds of monsters.

Doreen stopped. "But then you found her."

She put a hand on Jonah's shoulder, stood on her tiptoes, and kissed him. Jonah's world vanished.

He didn't feel the cold. He didn't feel regret for what he'd done. He didn't feel pain, remorse, anger, frustration, shame, a need for revenge, betrayal, hunger, rage, or anything that he did his best to hide and bury somewhere deep inside him. All of what weighed him down each day.

It all disappeared for those moments Doreen's beautiful lips were on his. That kiss made him feel strong again, an uptick from hitting bottom aimed to where he wanted to be as a man.

Those horrible things he felt, the ones he used as fuel for all the killing he did, could be used just as weapons now. With the love of a woman, they could no longer hinder him, only make him stronger.

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CHAPTER 33

"Not too far," Doreen said.

Heike carried one sled, and Jonah the other. Heike stopped, looking back.

"Stay close."

"OK," Heike said.

As they went out the front gate together, the speed walkers went quiet, smiled, and waved. Jonah and Doreen would get inquisitive looks and were obviously talked about, but Jonah got the feeling that most of the people of Henrytown—even Henry—approved and looked at them being together as a positive.

Heike had the kind of personality that made it difficult for her to sit still. It was her age, but also it was having to stay in the same place for long periods of time. Going out together dissuaded her from going off on her own again. Their favorite spot wasn't in sight of town, but just down the road: a long slope that began where the forest was bare.

What was nice about it was that it was steep but not so long that dangerous speeds were possible. It leveled off after about forty feet, creating the perfect foot stop of pure powder. Endless sledding and climbing back up the hill were a great way to exhaust a six-year-old—or to attempt to, anyway.

They always went out about noon to break up their routine. Perimeter checks—to ensure the fences were still intact—had become Jonah and Doreen's job. They did them in the morning and then again before bed. The weather had stayed cold, so the Molter parts, cocoons, Behemoth heads, and guts were still frozen. They probably wouldn't have to go on another hunt for a few weeks. Maybe even months if the frost held.

After Heike and Jonah had raced each other a dozen times, and she smiled up at him, red-faced, Jonah had to take a break.

"*Wieder*," Heike said.

"In English," Doreen said.

"*Warum Englisch*?"

"Because Jonah speaks English."

"*Jonah spricht auch Deutsch*."

Jonah smiled. Doreen had asked him not to speak German to Heike. Heike spoke English well, mostly from conversing with her grandpa, Henry, but Doreen wanted her to speak it fluently—especially with Jonah in their lives.

"And you'll be able to say more to Grandpa," Doreen said.

Heike nodded, liking that idea, and looked up at Jonah. "Again?"

"You should race your mom."

"*Ich möchte Sie—*"

"*Heike!*" Doreen's hands went to her hips.

Heike smiled mischievously. "I want to race *you*."

"All right," Jonah said. "Twenty more times, and then it's your mom's turn."

“I can’t wait that long!” Doreen said. “You and I will race Heike. Ready, Heike?”

“Ready!”

Doreen trudged over to Jonah. “You sit first.”

Jonah sat on the sled and pulled his legs up, and Doreen sat behind him, their adult limbs spilling off the child’s sled.

Heike repositioned herself evenly next to them after accidentally sliding down a few feet. “Go!”

“Hey, that’s cheating!” Jonah said.

Heike giggled as she sped down ahead of them. Jonah and Doreen shoved off, actually thinking they might be able to compete with a motivated six-year-old. They got about halfway down the slope before toppling off the sled.

“I win!” Heike said.

“You sure did,” Doreen said, staring upward at the sky.

“Rematch!”

“Give us a minute.”

“OK.”

Jonah and Doreen lay on their backs in the snow. Doreen’s gloved hand found Jonah’s. They looked over at each other.

“Snow angels?” Jonah said.

“Snow angels!” Doreen said.

They laughed as they swung their arms and legs apart and then back together, again and again. Heike landed next to them and frantically made one too.

“*We* win!” Doreen said.

“I’ve just started!” Heike said.

“Mine’s better!” Jonah said.

“No!” Heike said. “Mine is!”

“Let’s see,” Doreen said.

They stood up and took a step back, admiring the shapes they’d created.

“It’s a family,” Heike said.

Doreen looked up at Jonah to see tears in his eyes.

Doreen shook Jonah.

“What is it?” he said. “What’s wrong?”

“You were dreaming.”

Jonah propped himself up in the darkness. Doreen was right. He had been —about something terrible. The feeling from it was suffocating, like his heart was being squeezed—it was pounding.

As his panic started to fade away, he felt the small details he remembered about the dream dull, and then vanish, as they often did, but he could still remember some aspects of it, like where it had taken place: an awful place for

him.

"You were talking to someone," Doreen said.

"Did I wake Heike?"

"No. She'll sleep all night from yesterday."

"I'm sorry I woke you up."

"Don't be."

"What was I saying?"

"I don't know. I couldn't quite understand. It sounded like you were speaking another language. Not English. Not *Deutsch*. It sounded funny. Like you thought you could speak it but you can't."

Jonah yawned and lay back down, putting his arm around her. "Was it Arabic?"

"Maybe. You speak Arabic?"

"Not really. Some."

"What were you dreaming about?"

"A place I don't like."

"Something sad?"

"I was in the desert again. It was in the morning before it got hot. There were empty, blown-up buildings. I was alone."

"If you were alone, who were you talking to?"

Jonah got chills from head to toe. "I don't know."

"I'll never let you be alone," she said.

As Jonah settled back into bed—his heart still beating fast—that terrible feeling of loneliness slowly faded the longer Doreen held him.

Before falling back asleep, he felt Doreen kiss him on his cheek.

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CHAPTER 34

Almost the entire town had gathered at the picnic tables for lunch, except for those who had something else to do, but they'd be stopping by when they could. It was impossible to resist the smell of the meat as it steamed in the cold. Even the guards got some of it before going back to their posts.

Bernard looked over the group as if they were opening gifts he'd bought them. "I hope everyone is hungry."

"I'm starving," Jonah said.

Jonah, Doreen, and Heike sat together. Jacques was staring in their direction. He didn't approve of Jonah, hadn't accepted him as the others had, and looked like he was about to say something.

"None of your business," Henry said.

Jacques turned red. Jonah was glad Henry had said something, because he had been about to. The group began dishing up and eating.

"Glad you joined us, though, Jacques," Henry said. "You've been busting your ass."

Jacques clearly appreciated that. His hard demeanor softened, and he grinned.

"How often do you all get together to do this?" Jonah said.

Doreen placed a fork in Heike's hand; she'd been intent on eating with her fingers. "Every few months or so."

"We try, anyway," Henry said, taking a giant mouthful of meat. "Sometimes there's too much to do around here."

"When we have extra animals," Bernard said.

Jonah took a bite and chewed. "Any Molters ever get to them?"

"Not for a while," Henry said.

"We do all right," Bernard said, "even with them around."

Molters drained anything with blood in it, so an area with a lot of wildlife around where humans lived wasn't like that for long, which was why—especially during the spring and summer when the Molters' numbers increased dramatically—certain areas barely had any life at all. The Molters killed everything before moving on.

They ate in silence for a few minutes, enjoying the meal and one another's company.

Jonah looked over the group and smiled to himself.

Henry saw it. "What?"

"This is really nice," Jonah said. "I'm curious, though. How long have all of you been here? In this town. I'd like to hear about it, if it's all right."

"Why, American?" Jacques said. "You going to write a book?"

"Maybe. You want to be the main character?"

"Make him a hero, and yes, I do!" he said.

Laughter erupted across the tables.

"I've lived here my whole life," Bernard said.

"I was born here," Sven said. "Left when I was young and then moved back as an adult."

Jonah looked over at Jacques. "What about you?"

Jacques forced a smile. "All my life."

They'd all lived here for a long time. That was the consensus. It was their town.

Sven motioned to Henry. "You should have seen *him* when he first came here. Scariest American I've ever seen."

"Scary?" Henry looked to Heike. "I'm not scary, am I?"

"Sometimes," she said.

"*Heike*," Doreen said.

Henry grinned and glanced in Jonah's direction. Doreen held Jonah's hand under the table, and Jonah hoped Henry saw how happy they were together. Even though he had his family around him, it was odd seeing Henry so friendly. He was usually so tight-lipped about himself and stoic. He reminded Jonah of those of higher rank than he had been while in the military, a natural leader.

"How long's it been, Henry?" Bernard said.

"Oh, I don't know." Henry leaned back, his hot breath showing in the cold as he chewed. "A few years now, I'd say."

"Three," Doreen said.

Three years? Is that how long? Jonah had lost track of time.

Sven went on. "Tall, bearded, dirty—"

Henry looked over at him. "*Dirty?*"

Sven chuckled. "And looking for Doreen. He'd never met Heike."

With the change in the world, Henry had probably decided that it was his only chance to reconnect with his daughter. He was a determined man. That was obvious to Jonah even when he'd met him, whether he was struggling with his decision to reconnect with Doreen at that time or not. Jonah suspected he was. Henry had killed many Behemoths even before Jonah had met him on the road. No telling how many he'd had to kill after then to get here.

"Henry, don't answer," Jonah said. "What was the town called before Henrytown? Why change it?"

No one spoke up until Sven finally did. "The name had been a reminder, a painful one, of those we lost. It was the last name of the man who founded this town, and many still have his last name today."

"I would think that would be more of a reason to keep the name," Jonah said.

"For some, maybe," Sven said. "We were barely surviving before Henry came along. The Molters, they were . . . we'd lost most of the town. The old sign, the first one, had been destroyed. Then Henry came to us, and in a way we were able to start over. He taught us how to kill the Behemoths. That it was possible."

"He didn't want us to do it," Bernard said. "He objected, and he actually tore down the first one we made. We all know how he can get."

There were murmurs of agreement. Henry looked like he wanted to say something, but he kept his mouth shut.

"That's why the one that's up looks so decent," Bernard said. "It was an honor. It meant a new beginning for us. It meant we *would* live another day instead of *wondering* if we could. To us, Henrytown means life."

The emotion resonated throughout the group as they all flashed glances at Henry, thinking of everything he'd obviously done for them.

Bernard produced a wine bottle, uncorked it, and poured shot-sized amounts into plastic glasses. "A toast, as you Americans say." He passed one to Jonah.

"No, thank you."

"Come on. I know how much Americans like to drink."

"*Nein*," someone said.

"I said, no, thank you," Jonah said. "Thank you, but I quit."

A fork dropped loudly onto a plate.

"Mama," Heike said.

"Oh no," Doreen said.

Bernard turned, with a wine bottle and Jonah's intended share in his two hands.

Henry stood. "What the . . ."

"That's impossible," Sven said.

A Molter crouched near them.

It wore a soldier's uniform, four-clawed hands clenched at its sides and arms outstretched and low, ready to wrap someone up in an immovable embrace and sink its teeth in. The large jaws worked up and down wordlessly. Drool dripped from the corners of its mouth as its wild eyes inspected its prey.

How? Jonah thought, and briefly wondered if it was one of the three soldiers he'd fought alongside in the decimated town, but there was no way to tell whom it had been born from, and this didn't matter. It was there.

In a split second, it rushed the table they were all sitting at, yanking an older woman into the snow. Jonah leaped over the table, dinner knife in hand, and stabbed the side of its head before it could get its teeth into her. The Molter was still alive, though, so Jonah unhooked his machete from his belt and sunk the blade into the back of its head.

The woman stood up awkwardly, feeling at her neck, and then screamed and ran. She didn't get far. Another Molter landed on her, too far away for anyone to help. The Molter twisted her toward the humans as it fed, watching them as if defending its kill. The woman stopped screaming, unconscious from the blood loss already.

Jonah yanked the dinner knife out of the dead Molter's head and threw it in frustration. He missed, but the Molter ducked anyway.

"Get the guns!" Henry yelled.

Henry's booming command jolted everyone up from the table. They all ran for the armory, with Jacques in the lead. The animals across the town were in a panic, especially the pigs. It sounded like they were all being slaughtered.

"How is this possible?" a man yelled.

Screams suddenly came from the unseen workers. Molters had slipped past the fences somehow—probably through the trees. Jonah didn't see a Behemoth, thankfully. That would have made it much worse. The perimeter guards aimed inside the town, and gunshots rang out in what had been a peaceful day.

Jacques thrust an automatic rifle into the hands of anyone who came through the armory. When everyone was armed, he slung a shotgun across his back and grabbed an automatic rifle before heading back out. He stopped, cursing silently; set the guns down; and then ran back inside.

With many of the perimeter guards already dead, Molters vaulted over the fresh gash of Henrytown's defenses. The guards had been up all night and hadn't expected this to happen, not during the day.

Jonah normally had a gun nearby, a habit he'd formed from the war, but like the rest of Henrytown, he'd become complacent. It frustrated him that he had to go get one like everyone else, and wasn't able to simply raise an automatic rifle that was constantly within reach. Doreen held Heike. Jonah saw the fear on their faces as they watched him aim the automatic rifle.

There were a lot of Molters to shoot.

Jonah wondered if the Molters had been born from the missing people of Henrytown. Being attacked by Molters was nothing new, except there hadn't been an attack at Henrytown since they'd started putting heads on the fences, apparently, and the townsfolk especially weren't prepared for it to happen during the day.

The havoc the Molters were wreaking was terrible. The people were able to form an inner perimeter near the picnic tables, with the women and children at the center. Doreen and Heike were behind Jonah.

"Move! Move!"

The crowd parted, and Jacques dropped three heavy bags and let a backpack slide from his shoulder. He dropped to the snow, his breath ejecting into the air like hot, white exhaust, and he unzipped the bags. They were filled with ammo and must have weighed hundreds of pounds.

The remaining townspeople shot at the Molters as they leaped down from nearby trees. The ones that weren't hit were on the hunt the moment their feet touched the snow, looking for anybody they could sink their teeth into. There must have been hundreds of Molters.

Molters fearlessly charged the group, a tactic that caused it to break up, and they took down the stragglers. More people screamed—not only the ones that were being attacked, but the people who loved them. The way they were being killed was gut-wrenching. The Molters were ripping their throats open with their teeth or claws.

They weren't just feeding. They were killing.

"It's daytime!" Henry yelled, shooting a Molter. "How the fuck is this happening?"

Jonah single fired his automatic rifle. A few Molters had obviously figured out Henrytown's defenses, and then many more had, because they just kept coming through. In their own animalistic way, the Molters had organized.

"Our fences," Henry said. "I thought that took care of it. I posted guards for a human threat, not Molters!"

"It doesn't matter, Henry!" Jonah said. "They figured it out!"

Henry focused, nodding. He grabbed one of the guards. "Take three men to the other side of town and prevent them from getting through. Go!"

Four guards ran, shooting as they went.

"They seem to be concentrated here," Jonah said, "but I wouldn't expect that to last long. They're going to spread."

"I agree!" Sven shouted, calmly firing an automatic pistol. "Seems like all of them in the area are either here or heading this way!"

The town was a battlefield. Everyone was either shooting or getting bit. Many people were dying.

Then something especially odd happened. One of the Molters slowly walked through the crowd of death, as if it were close to falling over, like it had been shot and wounded but hadn't fallen yet.

That couldn't have been further from the truth. The sound from within it could be heard even over the gunfire. It sounded like bedsheets tearing, and the Molter erupted from within; its torso split open, it pitched forward violently, and it vomited dozens of Infectors that hit the ground running, going after any potential host they could find.

"*Heike!*" Doreen screamed.

With the group lessening each minute, the place where Heike had been protected was hit the hardest, and she'd been separated from Doreen without her noticing. The Infectors were scrambling in Heike's direction. Doreen and other men rushed over immediately and stood around her, shooting at the Infectors, but were unable to stop them.

Infectors were fast, could jump, and were hard to see on the move, especially in the snow. Those who protected Heike were inexperienced. They hadn't shot at and killed moving targets, so most of their shots missed. A few Infectors were able to rush past their defense and leap onto them. They screamed. One man fell, and another did his best to pull one Infector off the back of his neck before another jumped onto his face.

Jonah was out of ammo. He calmly dropped to a knee and removed the empty magazine, put in a fresh clip, slapped it upward until the magazine catch engaged, yanked the charging handle, pulled the stock securely into his shoulder, closed one eye, aimed, and exhaled.

He pulled the trigger, over and over, killing every Infector he saw fill his sight picture through his iron sights, preventing any of the vile creatures

capable of turning Heike into a Molter from getting remotely close to her. One shot, one kill. There were thirty rounds in the magazine, and by the time Jonah had killed all of them, he had to reload again.

Jonah calmly marched toward the Molters that advanced, firing as he did, putting down all that crossed his barrel.

Someone yelled for everyone to get back and tossed a grenade, and the Molter that had spewed forth all of the Infectors—the Infector bomb—exploded.

The rest of the people rose up after inadvertently ducking, taking their arms away from their shielded eyes. They heard what sounded like a bedsheet tearing in the distance, and another Infector bomb appeared, moving much faster than the last one, only it fell in the snow. Someone had shot it in the legs. The Molter erupted like the last one had, except this time the Infectors launched up toward the gray sky before falling back down, like the discharge of some mucus-filled volcano.

Not all of the Infectors had been killed, because there were people down in the snow. Not dead—they all had an Infector on them—but they would be eventually, no matter whether the molting was allowed to run its course or not.

"There's so many of them," Jonah said.

Most of the vehicles, aside from Henry's that happened to be nearby, were on the other side of the street in the garages, blocked by an army of Molters. Henry watched in horror as people tried to make it to them anyway. His jaw clenched.

Henry forced his keys in Jonah's hand. "You have to go!"

"What?"

"I want you to leave!"

"No, Henry—"

"The closer we get to night, the more will show up. Do as I say! Take Doreen and Heike, get in my truck, and get out of here now!"

Jonah glanced at Henry's truck . . .

He suddenly remembered Sharon's face the last time he saw her: angry at him but also not wanting him to leave. None of them did. But Jonah had left anyway, to get more IVs from the hospital for Daisy, and when he returned he had to kill the thing that Daisy had become, after it had killed Sharon, Danielle, and Gil. Jonah had left his friends, left them vulnerable, and they'd died because of it. The guilt from his own wretched behavior was unbearable.

Jonah felt his eyes flash warm, then wet. "*Henry* . . . I'm not leaving."

Guards surrounded them and fired in all directions, protecting Henry as he spoke.

"It's not about you! It's about them!" Henry pointed to Doreen and Heike, his jaw jutting angrily. "And you aren't leaving *them*, you're leaving this bloody town!"

"Please don't make me do this."

"Take my daughter and granddaughter away from here! They *need* you to keep them alive! I trust you!"

No one had trusted Jonah with other people's lives since before he'd got himself kicked out of the military.

Henry fired his automatic rifle, ran to his truck, and opened the passenger door. "Doreen, Heike! Get in!"

They rushed past him, murmuring brief good-byes. Henry passed over two more automatic rifles. "Take these!"

"You need them!" Jonah said.

"We have enough. Now *go*!"

Henry practically threw Jonah toward the truck. Molters were shot trying to get to it. Doreen held Heike close in the cab; the girl had begun to cry.

"I'll see you soon!" Henry shouted.

"This doesn't make any sense!" Jonah shouted back.

"We'll figure it out later!"

Jonah did as he was told, even though it was the hardest decision he'd ever had to make in his life. He was doing exactly what he'd never wanted to have to do again, but knowing what it meant to Henry, he did what was commanded of him.

Henry and the others would die without Jonah there, but he tried to cram somewhere deep inside himself the feelings about his actions, the immense regret he felt at how he was abandoning those he cared for deeply.

Again.

Jonah slammed the door and started the truck. After revving the engine to warm it up, he hit the gas. The large tires threw snow and dirt behind, and Jonah and Doreen watched through the windshield as Henry and the others covered them, shooting Molters to protect their escape.

In the rearview mirror, Jonah saw that some of the people were able to get to a vehicle also, but a door was open as it drove, and Molters were already inside. The vehicle rocked from the killing going on as it slowed to a stop.

Some people were even desperate enough to sprint for Henry's truck, a futile attempt to jump into the bed. But Jonah couldn't slow down for them. The Molters were already on them, and he couldn't jeopardize Doreen and Heike.

As they neared the edge of town and moved out of range of those who were covering them, Jonah floored it, running over Molters that tried to scramble onto the hood, crushing them against the snowy road.

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CHAPTER 35

Night *had* brought more Molters—even more than Henry had feared. The battle had forced the townsfolk into multiple homes. It was either that or die in the snow. Most dealt with what was happening through their natural instinct to flee and hide, and to wait for it to all be over, but separating had been a mistake. The Molters took advantage of the small groups, and many who went into a home to hide or fortify themselves never came back out.

No one attempted to reach the vehicles any longer. The Molters had identified them as desirable to the humans, and a mass of them blocked the way. A few of the homes were on fire now. It seemed some people thought they could lure the Molters inside by using themselves as bait and then kill them that way. Only there were far too many Molters that didn't fall for the ruse.

The roaring flames lit up the town on all sides, a few more of them having caught from the initial homes that were set on fire. A flaming Molter shrieked and came running out of a burning house. It clawed at its face as fire licked up from its burning clothing, and it eventually collapsed in the snow. A screaming woman ran up with a revolver and shot it anyway.

Henry cupped the sides of his mouth and yelled at the top of his lungs. "*Group together at the armory!*"

Retaining the group would be the only way they would survive the night. Some people were still alive because they'd listened to Henry and made it to the armory, where they should have stayed in the first place. They fought with the guns that had been stockpiled there—enough for multiple battles—except guns were useless if there was no one left to fire them.

Henry acted as a commander, a civilian who could have been a military officer, directing the firepower and filling in gaps where people were either dragged off, missing, or dead. Henry also did his best to kill as many Molters as possible himself. The more they killed, the less of a threat any of the foul creatures would be.

The Molters were getting in behind them somehow, even though there were men aiming in that direction, but then when Henry looked, he saw those same men being dragged away and killed before it could be stopped. Screaming followed the gunshots. With the amount of gunfire, it was hard to see where everyone was, who was still alive, and who wasn't. The Molters dropped down behind them from the roof of the armory.

Jacques's pump-action shotgun clicked empty. He dropped it in the snow and yelled something in German as he aimed his automatic rifle, but then he was tackled. The Molters must have dropped down from branches that grew over the perimeter fences, even though Henry had assigned guards to aim up into those trees. Another Molter joined the first, and they both bit into Jacques. He screamed.

Henry had aimed his automatic rifle to kill them both before they could kill

Jacques, when another Molter suddenly appeared right in front of him. Henry pulled the trigger, but the Molter was too quick. It dodged the shot, and then it was all over him.

Even though Henry was a large man and strong, he couldn't prevent the Molter from getting him down. It was far too strong. He'd never encountered such strength. Henry fought it as best he could, pounding his fists on its wicked face and shoulders and anything else he could reach.

The Molter went for his leg instead of his neck. Henry yelled as it sunk its teeth in. He looked over to where Jacques had fallen. Two Molters fed on him. He was dead.

Exhausted, Henry looked down at what was killing him—looked into its monstrous and pale, corrugated, ugly face and beastly eyes that reflected the fires that burned throughout the town. Its eyes were locked on Henry as it drained him of his blood, its teeth securely in his leg.

There was nothing Henry could do to stop it now. His strength left him with each passing second, with each gush of his blood. The people who tried to help Henry found themselves on their backs in the snow too, the Molters going for their throats.

There were so many of them. There must have been thousands of Molters in the town now. They were everywhere. All of the people left in Henrytown were going to die. Henry knew it. Those who remained fled in all directions. The guns they'd collected were now useless.

Henry heard many people calling his name and talking about saving him, but their panicky voices were fading now. The pain he'd initially felt was gone. He couldn't feel anything anymore.

He thought of Doreen and Heike and hoped they'd never meet an end like the one that was about to take him. He hoped Jonah had already gotten them far away from here. Moments away from death, at least he knew his family would live on.

He hoped.

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CHAPTER 36

The Molter withdrew its teeth from Henry's leg, no doubt about to make a move for his throat now that he was weakened enough, when its head suddenly blew apart. Henry felt its body collapse on top of him—it hardly weighed anything at all—and heard the echo of a gunshot.

Henry looked for the shooter and saw a man aiming a bolt-action rifle beside a truck. *His* truck!

"Jonah!"

A Molter rushed Jonah. Hunched, it looked like a pale ape. The butt-stroke Jonah delivered cracked like an ax splintering wood, obliterating its lower jaw, sending blood and sharp teeth across the snow. Jonah stepped over it and brought the butt of his rifle down into its skull—again, and again, and again, until it didn't move.

Jonah tossed the rifle into the bed of the truck and jumped in after it. Then he got behind a high-caliber weapon of some sort. Henry couldn't tell which kind from his distance. It was too dark.

There were a pack of Molters a short distance away from Henry, until he saw a brief explosion at the center of them. The sound was deafening. It rocked the entire town. When the debris settled, the Molters were gone. Jonah auto-fired the grenade launcher and blanketed the town with explosions, incinerating Molters and launching pieces of them everywhere, the concussion of the blasts resounding off the homes and buildings.

Henry ripped his belt out of his pants and tightened it around his leg. He had just enough energy to get up onto his feet. Once up, he glimpsed the driver of his truck as it sped past him. It was Doreen. She steered through the carnage with Jonah behind a vehicle-mounted grenade launcher in the truck bed. Grenades blew Molters to bits, dozens of them reduced to millions of tiny bloody pieces.

As Henry tore a strip of his shirt to also tie around his bleeding leg, Jonah continued to fire, seemingly intent on exhausting all ammo. The effect was spectacular. It was simply impossible for the Molters to contend with a skilled soldier behind such a weapon, especially one that was fully automatic. Grenade blasts decimated the Molters and bore into the earth below them, swallowing up what was left.

A moving target was just that, and the Molters were distracted by the truck at first, but then they saw it as the main threat, and they intended to take it out. That made them vulnerable to the other shooters. Jonah and Doreen made passes through the main bulk of the Molters, decimating them as they did. The truck attack was a double threat, both a weapon itself and a distraction.

Instead of leaving as Henry had asked, Jonah must have gone to retrieve the guns he'd mentioned. They were just the advantage Henrytown needed—now there was constant gunfire again, as well as explosions.

The Molter threat was diminishing. Either there weren't any more trying to

get in or they were giving up and fleeing. Whatever the reason, the people of Henrytown seemed to only have the Molters inside the fences to deal with now. Still, that was a lot.

Doreen slammed on the brakes, causing the truck to slide to a halt, and got out holding an automatic rifle. When she did she locked the door, and Henry glimpsed Heike inside before she slammed it shut. They must have run out of grenades.

Jonah jumped out of the truck bed, and as Doreen covered him, he immediately dropped to one knee and fired a rocket launcher into the small army of Molters that remained. The explosion also blew up the house behind it and rocked the night, briefly turning the darkness as bright as day, as wood shrapnel and glass aided in killing even more of them.

As the fire shrank, Jonah dropped the expended launcher and grabbed his automatic rifle from the truck bed. Then he and Doreen ran toward the Molters, firing as they did, each shooting in their expanded sectors of fire. It was an impressive onslaught of speed and bullets.

Henry bent over to retrieve his own rifle. He limped to where many were gathering near Jonah and Doreen, who had established a line of defense. Henrytown was now separated, with humans on one side and Molters on the other. Doreen threw a grenade that vaporized more Molters, widening the gap.

Finally able to group together again, with each Molter that they killed, the people of Henrytown were closer to taking back what was theirs.

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CHAPTER 37

Even with all the destruction, and the roads littered with corpses—of people and Molters—the HENRYTOWN sign outside remained unscathed. Below the sign was where those who'd been bitten by Infectors were. They'd been placed on cots, out of sight of the others. Blankets had been placed over them, and Sven was injecting them with a peaceful death.

Jonah had known the weapons would still be there, undiscovered under deep snow, and was glad Henry hadn't allowed him to add them to Henrytown's armory—for their sake. When Jonah and Doreen arrived at his buried truck, they knew time wasn't on their side, so they'd had to dig and load as many of them into Henry's truck as fast as they could. They'd driven back so fast that it would have made the Behemoth hunters nervous.

"Will you grab that?" Bernard said.

The man he spoke to hefted a trunk and followed him. Everyone seemed to be intent on going their own way and moving on. Many had packed up their belongings already and were going to leave soon. Henry possibly wanted to scold Jonah for returning, but seeing his daughter and granddaughter again, and safe, was clearly overwhelming for him. Without Jonah's disobedience he never would have seen them again.

The celebration was short lived, though, as they needed to tend to all of the corpses. Sven appeared, solemnly walked to Henry, and whispered something to him. Henry squeezed his shoulder.

"You're all leaving?" Jonah said.

"No choice," Henry said. "There aren't enough of us left to defend it."

"How did they get in? Aside from the trees?"

"They tore through the fences."

"We checked—"

Henry held a hand up. "I know. Wasn't your fault. They did it right before they attacked. No trouble for them with their strength and those claws."

"We can help out with whatever you need," Jonah said. "Help with the . . . deceased."

Henry shook his head. "We can handle it."

"I'm a worker. It's what I do."

"I know that. But not with them attacking during the day. It'll be morning soon. If half as many Molters show up . . . It's too dangerous."

"You don't know if they will."

"And we don't know that they won't. It's a gut feeling, but for now this town won't be the same. Maybe never."

Jonah looked around and saw Henry had positioned guards, ready for another attack. Henrytown had been so peaceful when he'd first seen it. Henry winced.

Jonah saw he was bleeding through his pants. "Better take care of that leg."

"Sven cleaned me up."

“Lucky for you I was still alive,” Sven said, shambling past them as he carried a crate filled with medical supplies. He loaded up the last of his belongings into a hatchback, four-wheel-drive car. He was out of breath. “You’d lost a lot of blood.”

Henry’s thoughts were elsewhere. “I’d never seen the Molters behave that way. Just killing.”

“Why would they do that?” Doreen said.

“We are their enemy,” Sven said.

“Maybe they think of a Behemoth as their mother,” Jonah said, “and they wanted revenge.”

“When we least expected it,” Henry said.

“That would mean they were capable of introspective thought,” Sven said. “Not as sophisticated as us, but perhaps similar.”

“I wouldn’t go that far,” Henry said. “I think it was just typical predatory behavior.”

“It didn’t seem typical to me, Father,” Doreen said.

“Some animals, like humans, are believed to be self-aware,” Sven said.

“Well, good for them,” Henry said.

“They did come from humans,” Jonah said. “They were born from us.”

Jonah thought of Daisy and the Molter that had come out of her. How he had to put it down just after it had killed Gil.

Doreen hugged Heike closer. “Don’t say it like that.”

“Sorry,” Jonah said.

“All those Behemoths we killed.” Sven’s breath was a jetting, white cone. “I think we made the Molters that served them useless.”

Sven’s statement hung in the air, adding an extra chill to the cold.

“Anyone ever see Infectors come out of a Molter before?” Jonah said.

They all shook their heads.

“And we thought we’d figured them out, Jonah,” Sven said. “I thought it was only baby Behemoths that could come out of them that way.”

“Can we stop talking about this?” Doreen said.

“Here,” Henry said, reaching into his pocket. “I stayed here once. I ran across it before I came here. Not sure if it’s still there, but if it is, and no one’s living there, its seclusion will keep you safe. Safer than here, anyway.”

Jonah took the paper and held it up. It was a map—crudely drawn and obviously from Henry’s memory, but easy to follow. The cabin that Henry indicated was about fifty miles away.

“I want you to take Doreen and Heike—”

“Father?” Doreen said.

“Shouldn’t we stick together?” Jonah said.

“I don’t know. That’s the thing: I’ve been here for years, and I’m not sure what’s out there now.”

“Well, I have been out there,” Jonah said, “and it’s as dangerous as you suspect.”

"Even more reason to do as I ask." Henry looked at Doreen. "I'll meet you there."

"When?" Doreen said.

"I don't know. I'm really not sure. We have all this to take care of, and I want you to be away when we do."

"When?"

"Someday. Stay there until I arrive."

"Who does it belong to?"

"No one, for a long time."

"And what if we can't stay? What if someone is living there?"

"Tell them your dad called it."

Doreen grinned and shook her head.

"I found you once. I'll find you again."

Henry stared at them. He wasn't going to change his mind.

"What will you do?" Jonah said. "Where will you go?"

"To find a safe place for us."

"Maybe I should do that," Jonah said. "You could stay—"

"Jonah?" Doreen said.

"No," Henry said. "I'd rather take the risk. You're trained. I need you with my girls."

Henry gave his daughter and granddaughter a proper good-bye with hugs and kisses.

"I'm cold, Mommy," Heike said.

Doreen took her hand. "Come on."

Doreen and Heike climbed into the truck, and Jonah closed the passenger door. Doreen immediately started the truck and turned on the heat.

"How long do we wait?" Jonah said.

"Give me a year."

"And after that? If we don't see you?"

"Move on if you think it's best, but only if you think it's best. I know everything will be different with spring approaching, but there's really nothing to attract them at that cabin. It'll take you a few hours to get there in these conditions."

Jonah extended a hand, and Henry shook it. Henry looked like he'd aged ten years since yesterday.

"I'll come for you when I'm ready," Henry said. "Take care of them. Whatever it takes."

Jonah knew what he meant. "I will."

Jonah glanced over to where Bernard was loading his belongings into the back of a truck and raised his hand. Bernard raised his hand in return.

Jonah put a hand to the side of his mouth. "Stay skinny!"

Bernard chuckled and flipped him off.

Jonah walked over to where Sven had just slammed the rear of his hatchback. They shook hands.

“Glad you came back,” Sven said.

“Me too,” Jonah said.

“It was nice talking to you.”

“You too.”

Sven looked like he was about to say something else when the truck window rolled down, revealing Doreen and Heike. “Take care of yourselves,” he said. “*Kümmern sich um Sie*, Heike.”

“I will,” Heike said.

Jonah waved and got in the truck.

“See you in *Sventown*!” Sven said.

“You wish,” Henry said.

As they headed through the mountains, the sun began to rise. Jonah looked over at Doreen and Heike, wanting to share the spectacle with them, but they slept, exhausted. Jonah had never been so thankful in his life. They’d survived when most of Henrytown hadn’t.

The farther they drove, the freer Jonah felt. Moving on, opening up, caring for others was something he hadn’t done in a long time. It felt like redemption. It made him feel whole, when before, and no matter what he’d done, he’d only felt hollow. The mountains before him were really something—beautiful and blanketed with snow.

He was going to fortify that cabin to the best of his ability by applying all of his military training. With all his weapons, and the equipment, tools, supplies, and ammo that Henry had insisted they take with them, he’d be ready for anything that came their way.

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CHAPTER 38

The cabin was as Jonah had expected it: small, maybe only a thousand square feet, with a short chimney and a stunted porch. It also had a cellar that Jonah filled with what they'd brought along, which meant there was quite the arsenal below their new home. They had everything they needed, considering there were only three of them. It was the perfect place to wait, or figure out where to go next. Henry had sent them there with that scenario in mind.

Jonah hunted whenever he could, and while he did, he spent the next few weeks getting to know the area. Snowy hills, tall mountains on all sides, and forest: that was pretty much it except for the long, winding road that led here. Rabbits were the most common game. Molters were targets too, but fortunately it was still winter, so there weren't many—at least not as many as there were during the summertime.

Jonah had become pretty accurate with his silenced pistol from a distance, and this day he had just lined up a healthy rabbit in his sights when he saw a Behemoth cocoon forming high up in a tree. It was too close to home to ignore. He'd have to destroy it. He was going to climb the tree and cut down the branch it grew from, before it got too big, but upon closer inspection he realized it was already enormous. He'd spotted it too late. Plus it was very high, and he wasn't exactly willing to risk falling if he could think of another way to destroy it.

He thought of shooting at it until it was dead, but he wouldn't be able to see his shots clearly enough to see if he was really hitting anything, not in all that fluid, and he didn't want to waste bullets. He even considered cutting the entire tree down but decided to wait and observe it instead.

As the days went on, the cocoon somehow grew even larger. Jonah made sure to hunt the same path each morning so he could check on it. He'd even set up a log to sit on. Sometimes he saw the cocoon stretch and flex from the inside, growing continuously, with Infectors swimming around their host, ready to fulfill their life cycle by infecting some unsuspecting human. The Behemoth looked like it would break out of its cocoon at any time.

Watching for as long as he did gave Jonah the time to hypothesize about its existence more. His head had been swimming with all that he'd spoken about with Sven. When he returned at the end of each day, he would explain his ideas to Doreen. She didn't want to talk about it much, so he did most of the talking.

He didn't mention that there was actually a Behemoth cocoon growing nearby—Doreen would have insisted they leave, no matter what she'd promised her father—so he spoke generally. Ordinarily he wouldn't withhold information from her, but he had the situation under control.

They hadn't seen any Molters out during the day since Henrytown. Jonah had once heard there were certain species that taught their young what they learned, like how to kill an enemy, and this knowledge was often unique to

that specific group. Hopefully it was the same with Molters. Their being nocturnal was the only upper hand humans had, in that they knew when to expect them.

Jonah suspected the Molters that attacked Henrytown were independent from the others, but he was glad to know that they were capable of hunting during the day, which changed everything. Before Henrytown, Molters had never been seen out then—at least not by anyone who lived. Maybe other people learned that fact too late. The link between the Molters and the Behemoths had something to do with it. They could attack day or night if that link was severed.

Hopefully future confrontations could still be relied upon to happen during the night and the drive to stay nocturnal was species-wide. It would be wise to be ready for them night or day, though. Many species could be nocturnal or diurnal, depending on which helped them survive best.

Doreen was on the side of the cabin, vomiting. She gently waved to Jonah, letting him know everything was all right.

"What's wrong?"

"Kill anything?" she said, and retched again.

Jonah held up another rabbit. "You aren't feeling well."

"Whatever gave you that idea?"

"Come on, Doreen."

The flu or any sickness could be a death sentence. They both knew that.

"Not for a few weeks now," she said.

Oh no.

That could be anything. Thankfully, Jonah was able to quickly dismiss his first diagnosis; Molter incubation took days, not weeks. Sickness in winter could be the flu, a common cold, pneumonia, or a bunch of other awful illnesses Jonah couldn't and wouldn't want to think about right now—all of them bad and potentially deadly. He and Doreen had never talked about immunizations.

Jonah's heart sank. They'd have to leave the cabin, get to a town or major city, and find another doctor.

Doreen was smiling. "In a good way."

There was no such thing as sick "in a good way." How could that be? If anything . . .

Jonah began to smile stupidly, feeling his heart thump hard with relief, then excitement, wondering if Doreen would have a boy or a girl.

Troubling thoughts woke him. Unable to fall back asleep, Jonah headed out

into the bitter cold as Doreen and Heike slept. It was still dark, but the night was clear. The moon and stars shone brightly in the sky, illuminating his path so well he didn't have to wear his NVGs. He'd brought them along anyway.

His theory weighed heavy in his mind, his breath a constant cone of heat as he trudged through the snow. The cocoon seemed to have formed from nothing, as if it had appeared out of thin air, like it had been born from the atmosphere itself. Jonah shook his head.

A climate-born species.

That must mean these were the perfect conditions for them. It was well known that the earliest simple life forms were produced from the atmosphere. Who was to say that this same atmosphere couldn't make evolutionary leaps forward and produce complex life forms? There were so many microorganisms that Jonah wouldn't be able to identify any of them under a microscope. Any of them could have been the beginning.

He was no scientist, but for him it was the only explanation, especially after what he'd witnessed. And if Behemoths were indeed born the way he suspected, then there was no doubt they were worldwide.

He wondered if the Molters served some purpose he didn't understand. What would the Molters be like in a year, or a hundred or even a thousand years? Would they continue to evolve like humans? Did humans still have a future on this planet?

As Jonah pondered these questions, he knew no matter what the answers were, the creatures were something humans were going to have to deal with every day. Molters weren't going away anytime soon. Nature giving humans such a challenge for their reign over the earth seemed quite concerning, though.

The battle between the species was conceivably evolution happening right before his eyes and was practically unnoticeable because the changes were so minuscule. Whatever the answers might be, Jonah planned on killing as many of them as he could before nature could figure it out. The way they were born was something no human understood thus far. Jonah didn't know until now, Sven didn't know, and Henry didn't know either. They had been unaware that nowhere was safe.

Jonah just hoped Behemoth births would be minimal throughout the spring and summer, given the welcome relief of winter. He had a limited amount of explosives. Depending on what happened in the coming months, he didn't know if they could hold up at this cabin for a year as Henry had asked them to, but then Jonah remembered when Sven had told him not to discount the resilience of human beings.

Got that right.

Jonah peered up at the cocoon. "This is our world. I hope you're ready for a fight."

As if in reply, the cocoon unexpectedly tore open with a sickening belch, and the newborn Behemoth fell out of it and hit the ground.

Jonah turned and ran.

The steaming-hot, gooey contents splattered the snow and turned the fresh powder into mist. The Behemoth rose shakily on its bony, slick limbs, and the Infectors scurried about the ground around it.

When the Behemoth saw Jonah stop running and turn toward it, it emitted a bellow that shook the ground.

Jonah held up a detonator from a safe distance, took a step behind a huge tree, and set off the explosives he'd placed in the snow days ago.

The blast echoed throughout the surrounding snowy mountains.

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BEING HUNTED

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CHAPTER 1

All the guns typically kept most from running away. When the Draw happened, they were encouraged to urinate or squat over a shithole. It seemed loose bowels were the most common reaction to having been chosen, but thankfully Otto had already gone both a few hours earlier. Sometimes it was difficult to do one without going the other.

Their way of doing things was arrogant, and thankfully—for him—the routine needed revamping. Guns were for killing, except they needed them alive. That was a major flaw, probably because their system was relatively new—and had been carried out for only a few years. It was a mistake, and exploiting it was his only chance for survival. The choice was an easy one: it was either risk being shot while escaping or die anyway. He didn't know anyone who survived once they were put in a cell.

Even though his situation was a truth he couldn't escape from, he still wanted to talk to them first. Try to talk them out of it. Remind them of the good times, like when he made them laugh. They always laughed at him. When the huddle of men broke up to seemingly go about their assigned duties, finishing their conversations as if Otto couldn't hear them and readying their weapons, he made the attempt while the others were out of earshot, pissing or shitting but most likely also praying.

It was painful to do, to hear what was coming out of his mouth, how it shouldn't be him but someone else, how he contributed too much to be considered, and how well liked others considered him to be. Half of what he said was a lie; others did some of the things he was claiming to have done, but not everyone was aware of every role. Within those minutes of his bogus explanation, it was possible to sway at least one of them. Long enough to disappear later by violating that trust instead of outright fleeing right in front of them.

Unfortunately they were far too determined. Archard's underlings had one job once the Draw was active: follow through with his orders. They must have thought his silence after his spiel was accepted defeat. Callousness was necessary for how they survived, but he knew they wouldn't kill him yet. They were spaced enough so he had a slim chance, so when they aimed their guns and told him to get in the back of the pickup truck, he ran. Ironically—and for a split second—he almost wished they had shot him because he knew what it meant if they caught him.

The scary part, even more frightening than the monsters that were always present and hunting them, was what was required for their system to work. What was strange was it had never been him on the losing end. It was others, people he didn't know very well or even care about. Now he had been chosen as its most integral element. He didn't want to think about it. Doing so practically dredged up nausea. The truth of what went on was why he fled in the first place, and as he did, he wasn't surprised with the direction he took; it

was an unfamiliar one.

Maybe he should have headed for another camp. It wasn't as if he needed to reach his own. Archard kept everyone regimented enough so that almost everything was in a designated place, which meant there were supplies he could find quickly to steal. He would need to grab only the basics: a canteen, packaged food, a weapon of some sort, preferably a knife.

What else? he thought.

Except almost everyone knew him or would at least recognize him. Newcomers were a curiosity and knowing their history a necessity, for the safety of the others. They were practically paraded in front of everyone as if they were trophies before a role could be assigned. He had no choice but to abandon his belongings at his own camp—no doubt word had already spread there by radio—but he wished he could have grabbed something of use before they went after him.

They probably believed he would head to his camp, which was why he was going in the opposite direction. He wished it would have occurred to him earlier that the danger was possible even for him, but he honestly hadn't believed it. He was a newcomer, but he did know some of them well enough to call them friends—at least he thought so—and although he wasn't armed, someone around where he lay his head at night might have helped him escape. Too late for that now. Instead, he was going where the land was unfamiliar.

Although he'd lived there his whole life, other than a few summers in France during his early twenties, and especially because of what happened since the Molting—it wasn't as if the airlines were up and running with tubes filled with people flying overhead—he wasn't familiar with this area of Deutschland. Now and then, being a local was a hindrance. He didn't know his own country well enough.

Escaping was a momentary decision anyway. Fight or flee and he had fled because he didn't have anything to fight with except his fists, and he hardly ever used those. Not since he was a child and that probably didn't even count. If he raised his hands up in a threatening manner as an adult, he had no idea what would happen. Even if he were a boxing champion, there was no way he could threaten a group of armed men.

Hard to know if his instincts were taking him in a safe direction either. That could be known only once the next undetermined decision presented itself and he made it. Currently he was correct because he was still alive, and they wouldn't know where he was going because he didn't either. The only problem with traveling an unfamiliar path was that it required him to go slower than a familiar one would. That made it possible for them to catch up.

It was strange, but he wasn't concerned with the ones that would drain him on sight or the big ones that fed on the drainers once they cocooned and were ripe, because the surrounding territory had been, relatively, under control. At least during the day. It was his fellow man he was afraid of at the moment, and unfortunately they were right behind him. He could hear a commotion,

the organized kind that was readying for a pursuit, but he couldn't see them. Presently, he was focused only on the snowy woods in front of him.

When he summoned up the courage to steal a look behind him, they didn't seem to be as close as he imagined they were. Plus, Otto wasn't the only one they were dealing with. Others who had been chosen took advantage of his chaotic escape and ran for their lives, too, feeling compelled to attempt to save themselves.

What did Archard's men think would happen? They would all just agree to be a working part of their system, to die as the others had before them? It was preposterous. Everyone knew what would happen. Especially now. He would be surprised if anyone went along willingly in the future because the way they did things wasn't going to end any time soon.

Not that he was innocent in all of it. He had done his part, well, hadn't obstructed what he knew was wrong. Self-preservation kicks in when in the proximity of a possible death, and when they had taken him in, he was just thankful to be alive. Before today he had started to believe he needed to fear only the monsters. If they caught him, they would put him in one of those cells, and then he would know what fear really felt like.

The captures always happened where people believed they were safe, but many had seen it happen in those same places, and for a minority of the some, it eventually happened to them. The way they used to assure those who were chosen would no longer work. They were lies, and those who were the instruments of the Draw were in denial. Denial was a frame of mind, a mental illness that infected the desperate, and these were desperate times.

His lungs were already burning. Why didn't he exercise more? Difficult to do with snow everywhere. The mountains weren't the best location to escape a blanket of white, no matter the time of year. The snow was so deep in places it looked like hillsides were covered in icing from a white cake. The thought of cake made his mouth water. And what kind of lunatic would go jogging in the snow?

Another funny thought occurred to him because what mystified him most of all was that he didn't hate the men who were after him. Sure, they had done terrible things and planned on doing a lot more of the same, but it was only out of necessity. They were practically forced, and Otto actually agreed with the way they did things. The Draw kept others safe. He just never thought he would be on the death end of it.

Not that it mattered how he felt about it anymore or how he felt about the people he knew, or thought he knew, well enough to consider friends. All of it had changed, and Archard's men were coming for him. Somehow, somewhere deep within him, he found some extra energy.

Adrenaline.

That was what it was. It made him faster than he ever thought he was capable of, even though he was dealing with a problem that would slow down an athlete in his prime: boots that needed replacing. It didn't help that the

snow was past his ankles. It wasn't as if he had the time to bury his tracks or go in a false direction, to backtrack, and then go a different way either. In order to locate him, all they had to do was follow his boot prints. Except they had to deal with the snow too.

Their yelling and revving engines and gunshots in the air were intended to intimidate him, trip him up, scare him into making a mistake or giving up altogether so they could grab him more easily. It was so strange. Only days ago he honestly cared about his pursuers. So much could change quickly. They were being nowhere near friendly toward him anymore and doing a fine job of getting that message across. He briefly wondered if they were holding back in their pursuit and making a game of it because they hadn't caught up to him yet.

There were definitely some of them who were in better shape than he was; he'd seen them with their shirts off, and sometimes tracking down their fellow man was their job, after all, but a desperate man was likely capable of above-average foot speed no matter the terrain. In this case, it was simply that his life was in danger, and he was going faster than those who were pursuing him.

Plus their job, under the circumstances, was to round up the chosen. What difference did it make how long it took? As long as there was still daylight, there was no time limit, Archard's annoyance level notwithstanding. Otto was probably making it easier on them, running as fast as he could and exhausting himself. They only needed him alive.

Why the hell am I so important? They have others. He had a sinking feeling as he realized the answer. *Not many of us left.*

Dismissing the terrible thought—and involuntary reaction about reality and their intent—to attempt to calm himself down for his own sanity didn't replace it with anything better. For brief moments, he actually thought he recognized where he was, at least the other side of where was familiar to him, but it was probably only misgivings because of his desperation. Recognition was what he desired, hoping to spot something familiar.

Instead he ended up trudging through a swamp, or what had been a swamp during a previous summer. Now it was a precarious, snowy stretch of dark, its clear ice easily giving way to—thankfully—shallow mud beneath, nothing deep, with each hurried step. When he first set foot on it, he thought the ice would crack and he'd fall through and be submerged in water that was somehow as deep as the sea.

The men stalking him weren't all born there as he was, but they navigated the land expertly, as if they had been. They drove trucks, had maps and one another. If he just kept to the other side of where was familiar, the land he knew well enough, he thought he would eventually recognize a landmark, mountain, or a town, anything that might lead him to a hiding place or a better means of escape than his own two shoddily booted feet. Any vehicle would do.

A vehicle of his own would certainly help, but it wasn't as if any he came

across would happen to have the keys conveniently inserted in the ignition and the door unlocked. And he didn't know how to hotwire a vehicle. All he knew was that if he didn't evade them and find shelter and food and soon, he would die from exposure within a few days.

And there were always much worse dangers skulking around the woods at night, looking to feed, ones that would have no trouble killing a weak, starving, thirsty, exhausted, and desperate human within seconds.

It was difficult to keep up the pace, to get substantial distance because they drove trucks—unfortunately for him, there were main roads and back roads scattered everywhere—and Otto was unaware of them and on foot. He could just imagine the look on the faces in the truck beds, the anxious anticipation of obtaining their prey so they could return to whichever camp and rest.

Resting was the only thing he wanted to do. That and eat. The only reason they hadn't caught him yet was because they didn't know where he was, just as he didn't know, either, but they obviously knew the land better than he did because they were still very close. Close enough that his heart felt like it was going to explode.

Otto was, essentially, a treed animal, and they were hounds, and he couldn't stop pondering how he had gotten himself into the situation. No matter how hard he tried to force it out of his mind, it was back in his head as quickly as he tried to think of something else. Shame was unavoidable when you were being hunted like an animal, and the situation was so far from something the person he'd thought he was would experience that he still had trouble believing it was happening.

Losing everyone he cared about and everything he owned made the situation unavoidable, he supposed, and that was by literally and figuratively venturing onward. The pursuers were just in his way and hopefully only terrorizing him for the time being. He was only one man after all. There were the others. If he caused them enough trouble, they would likely give up the hunt.

It had to occur to them that they weren't the only hunters out there. Eventually *they* would appear, but knowing how well Archard and his men exterminated the territory, Otto was confident he could stay on the current path. Still, a hungry pack of them was the last thing he hoped to encounter, excluding his pursuers. He didn't have a gun. If one of them got its claws or teeth into him, he was dead.

Adrenaline could carry someone only so far before limitations kicked in. They were gaining on him, and he was really beginning to tire. Maybe that was their plan all along.

No. They didn't know I would escape. And they didn't know where I would go.

Regardless of his review of matters, he'd never had to run so hard in his life, so it wasn't a surprise when his lungs abruptly gave out, his breathing becoming forceful gasps that he imagined only an old man sounded like. It felt like he was attempting to breathe through a straw. Even if he had somehow foreseen having to flee for his life and had trained for it, he still wouldn't be in shape enough to run forever.

That he was limited physically was just something he'd known about himself ever since he'd been a boy. He could hardly ever keep up with his peers and in more ways than one. He was never the fastest sprinter or even close to being able to hold his own with those who were. He was closer to the slowest joggers growing up. His burning lungs reminded him of that.

The fear of dying sapped his strength as well. He fantasized about where he would sleep tonight, but if he stopped for too long, they would catch him, so he decided he wouldn't sleep at all. Not until morning. Instead, he would afford himself only the briefest of rests when absolutely necessary—like now, so his lungs didn't explode—but nothing more than that.

All he needed to do was make it to some random shelter that was off their grid. If there was such a place, he could rest even longer and gain his strength, especially if they lost his trail. Then he could decide which direction to go in and hopefully choose a path to get to somewhere familiar that didn't run him right smack into them again. He just needed to get there. Determining where *there* was would have to wait. He would know a safe place when he found it. Somewhere that didn't make him afraid. He just hoped a place like that existed.

Until then he would go for as long as he could, no matter the physical pain he was in because he had no choice. He'd had blisters on his feet even before he fled for his life, and after trudging through a swamp, his feet felt especially painful. Cold and mushy, maybe even bloody. He had no time to inspect his sore feet.

Remain positive.

Thankfully, he was warm enough and luckily wearing appropriate clothing for fleeing for one's life in the middle of winter in the Bavarian mountains. He was nearly hot, his body coated with sticky sweat that already wafted off him as steam. Water could be drunk off cliffs when he was thirsty, which he now was, and he could go without food for a few more days.

Actually he wouldn't need to eat for weeks according to what he'd heard. He sure didn't feel that way. He wished he'd eaten before he learned the truth about his fate, before he decided to escape. Having something in his stomach would sure help. Instead there was nothing inside it but a rolling knot of worry that growled with protest.

Chaos was on his side, though. Anticipating trouble hardly ever seemed to work out for those in power. Especially right after it happened. That was in his favor. Though a contingency plan was often set up, things still often went wrong for the planners. Otto had learned that by being employed, by having a

regular job before the Molting. He was the chaos that they were trying to control, to eliminate, in order to maintain their way of doing things. But what if he encountered one of *them*?

There are trackers on your footsteps, and if the other threat presents itself, you'll know what to do.

His sudden thought could be considered brave, and it was as if it belonged to someone else. It surprised him, and he was looking forward to telling one of his closest friends about it. If he was still alive. He couldn't know if they'd all been captured. He pretended they hadn't been. No sense in making up his mind about something he couldn't know. Still, he looked forward to the possibility. He always enjoyed an engaging debate, especially with someone he cared about, and convincing someone who would think otherwise he was brave was something he would look forward to very much.

He realized what was actually happening to him. He was absorbed in a battle, the battle of his life, one that not only challenged his wits but also every part of him—his body, what strength he still had, his mind, and his will—more so than any peril he'd ever encountered. As a result of the preceding events, he felt as if he were already a different person. Tougher. Stronger.

That was when he heard a *bang*, and the trees above snapped in a hundred places at once. It sounded like a rifle shot, and there was shouting right afterward. Although he couldn't hear the voice clearly, it was definitely a threat to shoot again. They were shooting at him? Thankfully, they didn't know where he was.

The gunfire had to be only a tactic, their continuance of attempting to coerce him into showing himself and giving up. He wasn't stupid, and it made him angry that they believed him to be. He needed to remember if they were OK with him being dead, they wouldn't be searching for him. They simply would have killed him already or let him escape.

It was quite sad that it took a perilous predicament to strengthen him, Otto thought. Maybe that was how it always worked. How it was supposed to be, not just for him but for others too. Danger exposed weaknesses, and the common result was growth and strength. He may have been in danger, but there was a certain thrill to it also, similar to a debate. It was probably the unknown aspects of it and uncertainty of what might happen next. Of course it was difficult for that thrill to sustain. It revolved around his life.

A familiar noise suddenly came out of nowhere, as if it were behind a wall, so he headed toward it. That was when he saw a mountain that looked somewhat familiar in the distance. The situation was looking up, literally. If there was any more trouble along the path, he could deviate and find a different one that headed toward it. As long as he didn't encounter the men who were tracking him.

The sudden sound transformed into a splashing trickle, a stream, and melting snow had helped fill it. No matter how cold it might be, it was a welcome sight. He was already on all fours, scooping water into his mouth.

The icy water instantly cleared his mind and gave him a burst of energy. The multiple handfuls even temporarily tricked his stomach into feeling full.

After quenching his thirst to the point where he thought it might all come back up, and trying not to choke as he was breathing heavily at the same time, he stopped and got ahold of himself. Thankfully every ounce of refreshing liquid remained in his stomach. Staring at the surging stream, he briefly considered hiding under its surface, but that would be a useful tactic only if his pursuers appeared and only long enough for them to pass him by.

Upon further inspection, he realized the stream was probably too shallow and far too cold. If he waded into it, it would probably come up only to his waist, and if he submerged himself completely, he might still be visible and also might burst back up almost immediately, sputtering, regretful, and miserable, because of the stream's temperature. Envisioning going through with it almost made him laugh out loud. He may be running for his life, but at least he still had his sense of humor.

If the pain of the icy water didn't cause him to rethink the hiding place, then actually going through with it and holding his breath surely would. How ridiculous would he seem to his pursuers if he gave himself away by exploding up out of the water, coughing. Otto wouldn't be the only one with a sense of humor. They would easily subdue him and laugh at him while they dragged him away.

Following the stream had initially seemed like a good idea until frustration overwhelmed him when he realized the end of it was a waterfall. When he carefully leaned over the ledge to assess the cliff's height, he realized the bottom was a long way down. A hundred feet at least. Hearing what was going on behind him somewhere in the wood, the callous traipsing and angry voices, assured Otto that the men would appear soon. He could even almost make out who was speaking.

Panic of a sudden decision overwhelmed him—what to do, which decision would be correct—and he briefly considered backtracking, what he'd thought of doing before, but that could mean getting spotted if he weren't fast enough. He didn't know the area. Never set foot there. He only knew it generally from looking at a map and that had been only briefly. The only places he was familiar enough with to navigate were the main roads, and he was far from them. He had no choice. He would have to attempt the cliff next to the waterfall.

Will they follow me? He hoped not.

Descending too close to the waterfall itself meant he might slip, so he trudged far enough away from it so its current wouldn't trip him up. The final leg of his escape would be absorbed by the loud volume of rushing water.

Peering over the edge made him feel dizzy. He'd never cared for heights, so he decided to focus only on what was directly in front of him. That would be his plan, and it made the most sense for him to remain calm. Bushes jutted out an angle that was slight but looked gradual enough to maintain a grip and

sure footing on, as if the cliff itself were shaped like an abandoned ski slalom. Because there were brush and bushes to hold on to, it was possible to climb downward. Even though his hands were in gloves, the kind that kept hands very warm during winter, he suspected he could still maintain a grip, despite the fact that everything was covered in snow. Thankfully today the world wasn't completely frozen.

Archard's men would probably search for a way around so they didn't have to attempt a descent so precarious. The probability of finding another way down and then locating him was minimal, so he wasn't sure what they'd do. If they couldn't find him, they might even forget about him, especially with night fast approaching. No matter how tough they believed themselves to be, nighttime was often filled with teeth and claws, and that would chip away at anyone's confidence.

Once on the ground, he would run even faster than before, and then he would be safe, free, and the next group he joined . . . He would be much more cautious. Getting ahead of himself was easy for him to do, and he heard them again, their approach edging closer, actual sight of them looming, and his positive outlook was only wishful. It wasn't realistic. If he didn't act now, they would take him.

"Do it."

His voice sounded like it belonged to a stranger, a man who was prepared for all this, and it prompted him to head over the side of the cliff without any more hesitation. The bush handholds were sporadic but close enough for him to grasp for stability. He did his best not to look down, was afraid of heights actually, but his new inner person was not. Still, the majority of him that was still Otto noticed just how high up he was but did his best to see that only out of the corner of his eye.

A clump of shrubs snapped, and his foot slipped, forcing him to grab an improvised handhold but also involuntarily look down. His heart attempted to beat out of his chest, and he tried to blur out the bottom as if it were only directly below him and not a hundred feet down and just focus on what he hoped was a sure grip. He forced himself to calm down. Once he did that, he kept on.

There turned out to be plenty of branches, outcroppings, and flat rocks to grasp and hold on to the farther he lowered himself down. The chilly morning wind actually felt rather nice and cooled him with its forceful gusts, coaxing his exertion into something close to pleasant exercise. Even though it was winter everywhere, he had been growing rather hot. He was sweating quite profusely and steam poured off him continuously now.

Stealing a glance upward to where he'd begun, he saw he had already climbed down quite a distance. At least thirty feet. That was when a face appeared. A man whose name he couldn't recall. The one who was good at capturing monsters and also tracking people. He didn't look angry, or concerned, or anything really. It was a blank expression. It was as if he

weren't seeing Otto as a person, as if he were like any other animal that needed to be hunted down. That really made him panic. Others had obviously linked up with them, probably from the firing line or Fort Perry.

Otto had been wrong about his assumptions of what they would be willing to do. They were all coming after him the same way he was climbing down. Thankfully, he'd already climbed far enough to be well ahead of them. Not far enough, though.

Other than the one slip, the brush grew deep in the dirt and remained sturdy with each handhold, so he sped up his descent. They definitely didn't want him dead, a persistent worry, because one of them could have shot him already. The cliff wasn't as steep as he'd initially thought when he'd first peered over. Different from his current angle. It was probably why there was no hesitation in the pursuers above.

A sharp odor suddenly filled his nostrils, and he wondered if cliffs were also a place the monsters made their nests. He relaxed when he saw an animal stick its rear end out of its burrow for a morning excrement, and the steaming clumps of waste tumbled down the cliffside to disappear among some snow-dusted green leaves. He memorized where it was so he didn't accidentally grasp a pile of slippery shit and tumble down the cliff to his death. Another funny thought, and more proof of his sense of humor, but not so funny that he heard his own laughter. Better to remember the spot all the same.

He didn't know what kind of critter it was by seeing only its rear end. A raccoon or something? There were plenty of them in Deutschland. He couldn't think of anything else that looked like a raccoon, so he thought that was what it must be. The raccoon, or whatever it was, then disappeared back inside its den, oblivious to the descending stranger.

There were only so many things to hold on to, so Otto had no choice but to scale right over where the animal had appeared. Hopefully it was still turned around, and it wouldn't be facing outward, ready to scurry forth and bite him. He was directly in front of the hole, and he must have startled the animal because it let out a steady growl as loud as a bear as he passed, as if it were afraid Otto might take its home for himself. He didn't know the animals were so aggressive. The Molting hadn't changed only human behavior.

As he passed it by, he didn't bother to look. If it bit him, he would deal with it, but if he could just get by unscathed . . .

It was what they both wanted, he was sure. He probably could have reached in, grabbed it, and thrown it off the cliff, but there was no doubt it had teeth ready to use. Most animals just wanted to be left alone. He was no different. Best to ignore its display of ferocity, so he moved steadily but as quickly as he could, trying to make himself the least threat possible.

Having cleared the den, something that seemed to take an eternity, he resumed his hurried handholds. Navigating the animal's home had slowed him down a lot longer than he would have liked, and it happened inopportunely. The men were climbing after him as if it were a race. In a way

it was. Them being anywhere close to him was already too close for comfort.

Hand under hand, and fast as he could without looking up for fear of wasting precious seconds of escape and distance, he heard one of them yell. Not words, it was hollering, which caused him to glance upward long enough to smile before resuming the descent. The animal had clearly bit one of them based on the cursing that followed. It was just the distraction Otto needed.

When his boots finally hit the ground, he landed hard and realized just how exhausted he was from the climb. That but also all the running before the cliff, which was thankfully now behind him. Glancing over where the waterfall filled, he was impressed by the depth of the runoff. Finally at the bottom, on solid ground, he was ready to conclude his escape. Except he felt so strange.

Weak all of the sudden but not the kind of exhaustion caused by arduous activities such as running and climbing. And it felt as if somebody was pinching the skin of his shoulder. He reached as he marched away and felt that something had penetrated through his jacket. Plucking the thing out of him, he saw it was a dart. A tranquilizer.

As he felt the rush of unconsciousness quickly approaching, he looked behind him and up at the top of the cliff to see a man with a rifle. It was obviously one that fired such a dart. He could have shot Otto sooner but obviously didn't want him to fall. They needed him alive for what was planned, not dead. At least not yet.

Others had climbed halfway down the cliffside. In minutes, they would be on the ground where he was. Imagining being forced in a cell spurred him to gather what strength he had left and start running again. But he stumbled, and then he was on the ground and couldn't get up.

Otto heard someone groan but realized the voice he heard was his own and then noticed the boots of Archard's men—in far better condition than his—had already surrounded him.

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CHAPTER 2

Jonah quietly finished getting dressed as day-old coffee warmed in a mug on the woodstove. The smoke that ascended over the cabin used to worry him, as he feared that it may give away their position to threats, but it mostly faded into the surrounding trees and winter fog. After putting another log on, he glanced at the holiday tree and briefly wondered how Heike would decorate it this time, hoping she had enough ornaments. He decided she did, he thought while he slugged down the coffee that was nearly too hot. Then he went outside onto the porch, his breath powerful shotgun blasts of white.

After chopping wood, he charged the radio—the kind that didn't require batteries—by winding it before turning it on, and after dialing it to a low volume, he went about his morning exercises. Today was push-ups and crunches, followed by an eventual run. Exercising was an extension of staying motivated and how he'd learned to remain strong while in the military. It carried over to his life today, even though he'd gotten himself kicked out of the military for selling drugs.

There was a reason soldiers were taught basic survival skills and also why they were all trained in the same manner: using iron sights for rifle marksmanship and staying in shape without needing anything but your own body weight and the ground to perform exercises such as push-ups and sit-ups and run outdoors. It was so a mission could be accomplished without extra equipment or the reliance on technology, which almost always failed when most needed. Those who expected technology to save them or for the world to resume the way it had been were a dying breed. The Molting had seen to that.

Doreen discouraged him from going on runs when it was too icy out. Sometimes he asked her to go with him, and she often took him up on that. She enjoyed exercising, too, but she did not enjoy doing it outside as much as Jonah did. Plus she never wanted to leave Heike alone—they would bring her along—and running wasn't one of Heike's favorite activities. He would often open the door to see Doreen doing a leg workout, like body-weight squats or some other exercise that made her look sexy, and he never hesitated to remind her of how attracted he was to her.

Listening to the radio for any voice chatter had become part of his morning routine along with exercise, even though it hadn't resulted in anything he hoped for—communication from other people or a news report. Just like all previous mornings, the only sound was the insecure chatter in his own mind doing its best to combat the empty frequencies until he summoned up his inner fortitude to put himself back together. To do his best to hide his presumption that the end for them, and for all humans, was fast approaching. He made sure to get right before Doreen saw it on his face because he slipped up once, got drunk, and told her how he felt about everything after the baby

. . .

He didn't want to think about that right now. The alcohol he'd drunk he'd actually meant for Doreen because she'd mentioned she could use a drink afterward. It had been so long since he took a drink himself that he actually believed he could handle having alcohol around. He was wrong. He was still weak and shouldn't have been by himself. And he should have remembered how alcohol affected him and not been so confident that he could handle it. It would probably always affect him that way.

After quitting alcohol, forcing himself after Oberstein, he had been surprised by how his body came back to life. His energy came back. He could even breathe better, as if his lungs were stronger and his other organs were functioning better, especially his mind, like a muddy windshield sprayed squeaky clean.

Whiskey had made him feel sick all the time, even when its effects faded hours later, but he'd had to quit to understand that. Jonah had turned to alcohol to stay off drugs, which made sense to him as a younger man, but alcohol was hard on the body too. Being much more mature now, he realized he had been so inexperienced back then and so, so stupid.

That was then, and although he got low sometimes, just like anybody could, he felt much healthier now and also felt enough control over his addictions that they seemed behind him. And it felt pretty darned good to practically be the opposite of who he used to be, which was, if he were to be honest with himself, a manipulative fuckup. But just as it was wise to never underestimate an enemy, he would always remember that his weaknesses could cause his addictions to resurface out of nowhere and would wrestle with the strength he did his best to maintain every day.

After he slipped up, a pathetic attempt at medicating his own sorrow, he poured the booze into the snow for fear he would finish it and say more of what he shouldn't. Doreen had forgiven him, practically forgotten about what he'd said as if he never said it in the first place, because she never brought it up. It was as if it hadn't happened. He appreciated that and meant to never make the same mistake again because he was often solo when he went on his missions, so he could pretty much do whatever he wanted. They trusted him, so he needed to keep his shit together.

Doreen and Heike used to go out with him when he went on short trips to gather supplies, but lately Doreen was more content as a homemaker, still in nesting mode whether she had a baby in her womb or not.

A controlled panic about the reality of their situation was almost always a part of his morning routine as well, but after he got himself under control, he went about the normalcy of the rest of it. He'd always been an early riser, even before he wore a uniform, when he was a boy, just like his dad and older brother. He remembered the boy he had been and the mistakes that boy had made on his way to manhood. Jonah felt like a completely different person today. It was as if those memories belonged to a stranger and someone he

didn't like.

Push-ups were ideal for the upper body, since they not only targeted the chest but also strengthened the back, shoulders, triceps, and abs. For his abdominal workout, he executed a variety of sit-ups, crunches, and other stomach exercises that created a pleasurable suffering. That was an apt description for his exercise regimen.

He changed radio stations between sets or when he switched from push-ups to whichever torturous stomach exercise he'd chosen for the day. Though it was cold outside, especially during winter, which never seemed to end, he'd dressed warmly, and the vigorous exercise heated him quickly, enough for him to forget about the low temperatures, at least temporarily.

His routine served multiple purposes: it kept him in shape; it was something he did for himself giving him independence, it kept him informed; he didn't wake the ladies, the radio was kept at a low volume; and it made him feel normal. All were very important. While in the military, he was always doing physical training in uncomfortable environments, be it the cold or heat. Exercising was something he was used to and would continue for the rest of his life.

Actually his routine served an additional purpose, if he included the rare possibility that he'd actually catch someone on a channel, which would prompt an additional mission. He was convinced that might happen someday. So far the only voice he heard was his own when he uttered an expletive for various but necessary reasons. Doing so helped him keep his mouth clean when he was inside the cabin. Doreen didn't like cursing, so he saved it up for when he was by himself.

In all actuality, there were probably a thousand reasons his routine, especially the exercise, was good for him—or would be for anyone, he realized—because it served so many purposes, mentally and physically. They were all positive reasons, but another one was that it caused him to reflect. Allowed him the time to do so. It was natural for him to mentally go elsewhere, away from the vigorous activity of exercise, which unnaturally pushed the body to achieve whatever goal the evil part of his brain had decided on, whether it be for the day or the long-term.

Focusing on something other than the physical strain of muscles becoming inflamed only to be broken down—that was what it felt like until the healing process ended—allowed Jonah to not only think about what he wanted to think about but also to think about things he didn't necessarily want to or even anticipate.

His mind often had a mind of its own, and he often had no choice but to trust there was a mystery pilot flying his brain plane to a destination it needed to arrive at. He'd accepted his reflections long ago, and they tended to increase while he was on guard duty. He was positive it was all beneficial, even when it was painful, which was often when it was the most helpful. He allowed his thoughts to go where they needed to go, especially when it was

safe, like while doing some sort of exercise.

Running, which he would do in a bit, allowed him to further mentally filter through the events of his life, and that was easier now than when he'd been younger, even though some of the darkest times were so fresh and raw because they'd happened only in the last decade or so. But he was older now, and he felt more grown-up, too, especially because of how much had transpired, forcing him to mature in ways he never thought possible.

Major events had crafted him into the man he was, the good along with the bad—he realized and accepted that he was who he was today as a result of the very creatures that threatened humanity—and acknowledging the good and bad in his mind, remembering why it all happened, reminded him not to make the same mistakes again.

Even though he kept a careful watch on his surroundings and could dart back inside if he needed to, he still kept a weapon nearby—pistol or shotgun. Molters often attacked out of nowhere, and he didn't want to be surprised while doing lunges. "Embarrassing" wouldn't be a strong enough word to describe dying like that. He was a veteran. Maybe he could convince Doreen to guard him while he did his push-ups or some other exercise that made him feel vulnerable. He would ask her to get a laugh. When she woke up. Even though she was a prior servicemember, and one of the foundations of the military was to get up ridiculously early, she enjoyed sleeping in.

Thinking of Doreen reminded him of what he'd gone through in Germany, before and after the Molting, and how he considered her, and her daughter, Heike, to be his family now. They had replaced the friends he'd lost. He often wondered who he would be, where he would be, if everything was normal. If there were no Molters. Would he be the same because of his age? He doubted it. He'd probably still be a fuckup.

Many people went out into the world once they grew up, as he had. For most, friends replaced family and bonds formed. Some friendships could last a lifetime, but sadly most ended. When you were young, friendships and relationships were often based only on proximity, were superficial, and were as easy to break as they were to form. It seemed most friendships or romantic relationships began so they could end. Except when someone special came along.

While medicating himself with substances and friendships, Jonah had realized he had been searching for a family or, more specifically, someone special all along. Just because he had gone about his life normally didn't mean he'd used people. He hadn't; he'd been available to them as much as they were to him, but he'd always been hoping for a meaningful companion. Jonah had found that person in Doreen and intended to spend the rest of his life trying to make her happy, inadvertently making himself happy too.

Though he was a bit robotic in his thinking, and though he likely would have trouble conveying his thoughts to someone else—other than Doreen—that was essentially how he viewed friendships and romantic relationships. He

couldn't imagine his life without them and even thought he would die if he were suddenly, solo as he feared he would be.

That wasn't entirely true, though. He needed to remember. Unfortunately, he'd experienced what actually losing people felt like, in the war and by Molters, and it hadn't killed him. He knew it'd made him harder, tougher, and frostier emotionally, and there had been moments in his past when he'd wanted to die, even kill himself, but the reality was that all of those terrible things had made him stronger.

Life had few neutral zones. The only one he could think of was in the midst of romance. Everywhere else forces were doing their best to topple people over. It was just a question of how much fight someone had in them or if they were willing to push back. He knew he did, and he also realized that such observations would likely have never occurred to him if the world as they knew it weren't presently ending. Lives went along on a natural path unless cataclysmic events reformed them, sometimes by figurative mutilation.

Jonah's friends had been killed by things that were never supposed to exist, not in this day and age, not while humans reigned, but also not when man had been in control of what killed him for thousands of years. There were always exceptions, and whatever had killed humans in the past almost never disappeared completely. Most of the time, it simply evolved, like the flu, but modern-day humans had been—relatively—in control over how long they lived for over a century. Before Molters, mankind's biggest threat was age.

Present circumstances made Jonah wonder if something similar had happened before. Dinosaurs, and whatever was actually responsible for their extinction, came to mind. There were many theories, but he guessed it had been something drastic, a sudden change that altered everything. He wondered if it was similar to the Molting, something microscopic—mysteriously born from the atmosphere—and he didn't doubt it had something to do with climate change.

It was logical that Earth was in a constant state of evolution. Though they took physical form, Molters and Behemoths could be considered climate change. It made sense to him. He wondered if he could explain that to someone other than Doreen without sounding like a lunatic. She said his theories were understandable when he told her about them. That was her exact word, *understandable*, and Jonah took that to mean she was listening because she loved him, but he didn't know if she believed all of his explanations.

Believed in what he said well enough not to leave the mountains as he'd feared she would. He hoped one day someone would assure him that all of the things that worried him were ridiculous and that everything wasn't as dire as his gut told him it was, but he doubted that would happen. Knowing that the planet Earth had it out for humans was difficult for anyone to swallow.

Too many thoughts about the end of the world made him feel crazier than he actually was, so he decided to redirect his thoughts for now. He only allowed himself to think about *them* for so long. All of it took a toll on him, so

he decided to think about something else entirely, something more human, like the fantasy of a normal life.

"Like that's possible," he grunted.

Laughter accompanied spittle as he finished another set of push-ups. He allowed his knees to touch the ground. Hearing his own voice actually made him feel better. After slowing his breathing, he straightened his legs and began another set, and while he pushed again and again and again, he thought of Doreen and how much he loved her, but along with that was a familiar tug of pain. Not just his own. He felt hers as well.

When will that go away? Probably never.

Being vigilant with everything he did meant he was highly aware of her emotional health and state of mind. With what she had gone through, he did his best to deal with it, which was, essentially, not dealing with it at all. He basically ignored what was going on because he didn't want to make it worse. Being unsure what to do made it so he thought it was best to do nothing unless initiated by her.

Nothing but be there for her as any man should be there for his woman: by being there physically, to hug, cuddle, or hold hands, but most importantly by being as emotionally available as she wanted. If it were up to Jonah, he would steal her pain away, eat it and swallow it and deal with however it affected him. If only that were possible.

At least Doreen had Heike. If it were only him and Doreen together, if anything had happened to Heike, Jonah didn't know if Doreen would still be alive. It wasn't that Doreen was weak. She wasn't; she was as strong as any woman he had ever known, and it was one of the reasons he loved her so much, but mothers needed to mother as much as men needed a mate. Otherwise, he thought, what was the point of being alive?

Everybody could be weak or strong and occasionally both at the same time. For Jonah, the hard stretches were when he teetered toward weakness for extended periods, especially when he was doing his best to fight toward strength but feeling paralyzed in ways he didn't understand. The depressed times that lived in his mind and seemed determined to take up permanent residence. Remaining busy was the most reliable remedy.

The only other reason someone would want to live for something other than family was if they wanted to devote themselves to a purpose, a cause, and be selfless. The military came to mind. Serving was like swimming downstream. All that was required was that you do what you were told. The downside was it wasn't so easy for romance. Jonah had met many fellow soldiers whose marriages didn't outlast their careers.

Most people devoted themselves to something of importance, or perceived importance, at certain times in their lives, but it was usually only temporary. If it didn't last, then those who claimed to want to live that way were either liars or fooling themselves. Unless it was a passion that needed to end because of age or some other natural and impossible-to-prevent occurrence. Almost

everyone was passionate about something, but nothing really mattered if you were alone. That was what Jonah believed. It was one of the most important lessons of his life.

Best to be honest. Best to know oneself enough to understand the primitive animal that existed inside every human being, the part that would fight or flee when backed into a corner but also the part that needed to be social, needed others, especially that special someone. Some were fortunate and never experienced being alone.

Not Jonah. It had happened to him after Oberstein, and even though he'd occasionally fantasized about being by himself, that everything would be easier, he realized he was wrong to think that way. They were only fantasies and the foundation for them was his fear of loss, which he'd now accepted as very normal. And now the idea of living on his own would be hell.

Being lonely had been physically painful, the worst agony he'd ever felt, but he remembered being unsure where that pain was exactly. Somewhere between his heart and stomach? He was a soldier, and soldiers were trained to endure every kind of hardship. Except soldiers were also human, and unfortunately humans had their limitations. Jonah's biggest weakness was his need for a woman. Other than the unpredictability of his emotions, it was the only weakness he could think of. Neither were actually weaknesses, just examples of being human, but they did make him vulnerable.

Thankfully, the pain of loneliness was gone, replaced by the love of a good woman. If Jonah didn't have Doreen, if something happened to her, he didn't know what he would do. He definitely wouldn't kill himself. Not anymore. That would betray her memory. He would probably regress into something close to what he had been before he'd met her. Just a Molter killer. Occasionally horrible thoughts of the worst possible situations slithered inside his mind, no matter how many push-ups he did. It was one of the flaws of him being human.

"Take care of Heike is what you'd do, dummy."

When he did his exercises, he didn't count out loud or in his head. He simply went all out until he was close to muscle failure—he liked himself a lot more these days but still enjoyed punishing himself for some reason, probably because pain was familiar—and right up to the point when he barely had anything left.

Or when he barely had anything else to think about or when he didn't want to think anymore because he was tired of it. He could only reflect so much. Too much of it made him feel how he used to feel, when he was in pain and regretful and wanted to die, when he was willing to allow himself to die in a battle.

When he wasn't reflecting, he liked to be in the moment. With Doreen and Heike around, there was always something to talk about or some new activity to enjoy, and they brought out the best in him. They made him healthy. They were a part of him now, and through them he could compartmentalize his

wretchedness, the despicable things he was capable of, the part of him full of mistakes that he hated but that would always be there. Stuff it down deep inside somewhere and use it only when needed, because he'd learned his woes could be used as a strength, a loaded weapon kept in a figurative closet for defense.

As he began another set of push-ups, hitting bottom, the desire for his life to end throbbed inside him like a distant memory. It was how he'd been when he was on the road and on the move and alone. Hard to imagine his life being like that now. It was only him and his people, but they were together. If he found himself on his own again, he didn't know if he could remain that way for long. He would have to meet another woman.

"*Enough* of that."

Doreen was his woman, and he would hate to lose her, but because of her, he was healthy enough to go on if he absolutely had to. He would want her to do the same. He hated that they lived in a time when subjects such as that needed to be considered and sometimes even addressed through discussion.

Who would she pick, though? Not many men to choose from around here.

He felt a pang of jealousy thinking about another man who would hold her and kiss her and *ahem* . . . in the future if he got himself killed. That in itself made staying alive worth it. He knew not to voice every crazy thought in his head, and expressing jealousy over an imaginary suitor belonged in the category of things not to say. If he did say everything on his mind, Doreen would probably, well, not leave him but definitely tune him out temporarily or longer. He was glad he'd learned when to shut up.

His thoughts could be dark. Jonah knew that, but thinking gave him something to do to distract him from an ever-present freezing winter and the threat of what they faced every day. What all humans who were still alive faced. One thing he was sure of: he wasn't about to let any of them get near his people. He would die before he let that happen.

He popped straight up and wiped his sweaty brow. His abs were still sore from yesterday's exercise, so he decided today's workout was over. Unless he went on a run but he would decide when to go a little later. The best time was at the end of the day, and he wasn't exactly dressed for it. He always did his morning exercises dressed for a mission because that was typically what he did afterward. He switched off the radio.

Intending on going out to clear, and to be gone for most of the day, and before the ladies woke up, he checked the lock on the cellar door, where most of the weapons, supplies, and emergency food like MREs were stored. That included the fully automatic grenade launcher they'd used during the battle of Henrytown, to prevent it from rusting. Jonah ensured every weapon system was operational for the future by keeping them clear of dirt and debris, but especially that weapon in particular. When he inspected the lock, he found it was functional and free of rust. It had been that way yesterday and the day before that. He wiped it clean anyway.

He also inspected the trucks—Henry's and the backup—performing daily preventative maintenance but also performing actual maintenance when required. He shoveled snow away from the tires and started them up for a few minutes. Only for a short while, though, so as not to waste too much fuel. Then he moved them to a different parking spot so they wouldn't get stuck in the snow. He always reparked them when there was daylight so he could keep the lights off. It wasn't as if he didn't know the immediate area like the back of his hand and couldn't practically accomplish the routine with his eyes closed, but still, lights drew attention.

The functionality of what was relied upon often went south suddenly, so that was why he was so diligent. If he allowed weeks to go by without doing what needed to be done, they could be faced with a situation when things needed to work but did not.

Another part of his routine was looking over his map after clearing the snow off the picnic table, which he'd found and brought home months before. Once it was spring, they would eat outdoors. Part of him had hesitated before hauling the table home because of what had happened at Henrytown, when the Molters had attacked as they all enjoyed a meal cooked by Bernard at tables just like it, but he wouldn't allow the Molters to delegate how they lived their lives. He wouldn't let them win in any respect.

His lips worked wordlessly as he pored over the map, and he was almost ready to leave. Going over the map every day kept the stash locations fresh in his memory.

After he made sure the quick-release scope was in his backpack so later he could attach it to the bolt-action rifle he carried, its barrel safely pointing down at the deep snow, and that his machete was in its sheath dangling against his left hip, he left the sanctity of the cabin.

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CHAPTER 3

He had explored a southwestern direction before, but Jonah realized he hadn't been this far from the cabin because he'd never seen the metal shack. It was possible for another community to be on the other side of any random mountain, and if there were, he hoped they were friendly, like Henrytown, but he wasn't aware of any others. It was just himself, Doreen, and Heike that he was aware of, and if anyone else did live nearby, he hoped to have eyes on them first and not the other way around.

The structure was in shambles and rusted, but at least the roof and walls were somewhat intact. Sturdy enough to block the wind and not collapse while he was inside it. It was rather bare except for a shoebox, and once he lifted it, he had a flashback, as it could have been a trap meant to trigger a bomb. Except such warfare was of a bygone era, was a devious tactic used only by cowards during wars from the past, not during the present one against an enemy that were only animals. Even though they could still be devious in their own right.

Inside the shoebox was another radio that required winding to power it. Jonah had three like it already. There were dated, crumpled newspapers on top and beneath the radio, probably to keep it from being damaged while in transit. The messy innards seemed like they'd been rummaged through already, as if there had been something deemed more important inside. He considered taking all the paper with him to read later, but it was all in German. Jonah spoke German better than he read it.

Whoever had been there last was obviously long gone. Perhaps the radio wasn't hidden, only forgotten. Maybe it was broken or no one thought it was important enough to take along. They'd obviously taken their other belongings with them because there was nothing left in the shoddy dwelling except for the obviousness that no one had lived there in years. They might have thought the radio, like any form of old technology—other than weapons—was useless.

Hope was pointless to most, except to those who knew better. Remaining positive was never pointless, Jonah knew, so the extra radio was quite the find. Now all three of them could have the same kind of radio and one extra. It was possible things could go back to normal one day. He envisioned himself, Doreen, and Heike scattered inside or outside the cabin, on different stations, listening to different music.

A broadcast interrupting a favorite song explaining how everything was under control would be even better, he thought.

Turning the radio over in his hands, he was able to inspect it further, and there didn't seem to be any damage. It still looked functional, adding to the mystery of why it was left behind. There was only one way to find out. When

he cranked the lever, the sound reminded him of a child's toy, the kind set down to skitter across a floor to entertain a toddler.

Jonah froze and peered around the rundown, abandoned shack, once again making sure there were no living things nearby, inside or outside, but himself. No blips on his inner danger radar, so he turned it on.

The throbbing hum of nothing, just static. Even when he twisted the knob to every available channel, the hum of empty frequency hardly changed. He felt similar to when he'd tried the same thing in a utility vehicle back at Oberstein after finding piles of flesh in the headquarters building of the military base he'd been stationed at all those years ago. It made him feel just as discouraged.

Maybe even more so because of how long they'd considered the cabin home. He figured there would be a hint of another human being at some point. He always hoped something significant would present itself, some nondescript example of the way things were when humans were the dominant life-form on Earth. The kind of random, meaningless experience of daily life that had been taken for granted, like smelling a neighbor cooking breakfast, eavesdropping on a conversation, listening to the sound of traffic, or hearing or a baby crying. He cringed and wished he hadn't thought of that. Thinking of it actually caused a rare pain somewhere near his heart.

Out of everything that had happened since their arrival at the cabin, Doreen's miscarriage had been the most devastating. The most detrimental. It wasn't very often during human history that a death was also a severe loss to the entire human race. There were only so many people left. Were Jonah and his people the last alive? He still had many questions, and he didn't know the answers to them.

Better to stay focused on the task at hand.

His fingers found their way up to scratch at his brown beard, and he was surprised how deeply they sunk in, realizing he didn't remember the last time he had shaved. Doreen never asked him to shave, which he appreciated because beards did their job at keeping a man's face warm, and being allowed to grow a beard was likely every man's secret wish anyway, including his own.

He rolled the black backpack off his shoulder and onto the ground. After stuffing the radio inside, he changed his mind about all the papers and crammed as many of them as he could into the empty space. All paper burned, and it was the easiest way to get a fire going in the woodstove, a daily necessity to keep the cabin warm. Then he zipped the backpack shut.

Emerging outside the shack, he inhaled deeply, welcoming the chill that stung his airway with its freeze. He'd been acclimated to winter long ago. He wiggled his face, feeling it stiffen, took his glove off, and felt his mustache with his hand, wiping away the frost. Occasionally his facial hair froze. Then he shoved that hand back into the warmth of the glove.

Today was another success, and he determined that by whether he

discovered anything of use. The nice thing about the radio now in his possession was that it was similar to some of the flashlights he'd found that needed only to be wound to function. Not that he needed to use them yet. He'd found plenty of batteries, and they had a collection of regular flashlights that were powered by them. The only question was whether the batteries still had power or not. Most wouldn't expire for years.

The radio and flashlights that wound to function would likely be useful for trade, but considering how many people he'd encountered lately, he wasn't sure how much bargaining would be done in his future. Almost two years had passed since they left Henrytown. And still no Henry. They'd stayed even though Henry had told Jonah to wait for him for only one year.

Waiting for him to show up had evolved into something similar to anticipating a favorite holiday. Except it was one that might not ever arrive. They had been optimistic the first year, especially the first few months of it, because of Henry's confidence when he'd sent them away. Marking the days on a hand-drawn calendar had been Doreen's idea, and although Heike's positivity had never wavered, it was disheartening to see all those *X*s, especially now that Doreen was filling another calendar with them.

The first year's *X*s were colored in red, but Doreen had changed her mind about what she would use for the second year. Red wasn't exactly the best way to illustrate her father's absence, as the color was mostly associated with blood and death. Now she used a black marker instead. Jonah grabbed anything of use or potential use while out searching, and he had found plenty of pens. Most were black or blue. Doreen had mentioned she looked forward to showing Henry the calendars whenever he showed up.

If he shows up, Jonah thought as much as Doreen mentioned it.

Sometimes Jonah wondered why they remained at the cabin and realized a part inside him was set up permanently to do as he was told because he was a soldier and also because he was the result of attentive parenting. Jonah was obeying Henry's wishes. They also stayed because the cabin was safe, and any unfamiliar place should be considered dangerous until proven otherwise.

No matter what Henry's standing, good or bad, alive or dead, they weren't willing to move on yet. And him driving up to the cabin seemed like some far-fetched fantasy. *Where else do we need to be?* Doreen had said that when Jonah had last broached the subject of relocating, wording it as carefully as possible so as not to upset her. He'd said nothing because she was right. They didn't need to go anywhere else that day, the day after that, or the next. But at what point would they decide, would Jonah decide, that it was time to find a safer place to live?

It would be a decidedly difficult task to convince Doreen that they could move anywhere that could be safer, and to be honest, homier, than the cabin because of its isolation and their control over it. Control meant survival, and Jonah's foothold over the territory ensured that. Killing the enemy and stockpiling weapons—plenty of them, as well as ammo—kept them alive.

Each productive day made it so the next would be under control and livable too.

Because of how many weapons were actually in the cellar, Jonah could arm a battalion of soldiers if they happened to show up without any guns and hoping for a handout. That was only a slight exaggeration because Jonah fired a bullet only when he was sure it would be a kill and loaded only whichever weapon he designated of use against the enemy for that day. It depended on which creature he was hunting for or expected to encounter.

A high-powered rifle was ideal for cocoons in the distance, while a silenced automatic rifle, shotgun, or pistol were ideal for close-quarters extermination. A pistol was preferred for Infectors. Gunfire could and likely would attract undue attention. He did his best to pull the trigger only as many times as it took to drop any of the creatures. When they were down or already dead, he ceased fire. He was careful because bullets were practically currency and very well might have the same value as money in the future.

That was why he gathered as much ammunition as he could find, whether he possessed the weapon system that was capable of firing the ammo or not. He knew it was always a possibility to find a match one day—if he hadn't already—and he never wanted to be in a situation when he reached for a weapon only to hear it click empty. He had too much to lose.

As the days went on, he'd accumulated more ammo and weapons, so much so that Doreen joked that the cabin was the armory. That wasn't much of an exaggeration, either, which was why not every instrument of death and destruction was located in the cellar. Jonah wasn't naïve enough to put it all down there. Not that it could all fit at this point. No, he'd buried weapons all over where he considered their territory, essentially a two-mile radius surrounding the cabin, the extended perimeter.

He'd drawn copies of his map and backups of it in case any of them were damaged, lost, burned, stolen, or destroyed however else they could be. He kept one in his backpack, one under the mattress, and one in the cellar, and backups were buried nearby. He'd even drawn false maps of hidden locations, and they were the ones most readily available to potential thieves, easily findable just inside the door to the cabin and a little harder to locate inside both trucks. In Henry's, the map was inside a gap in the ragged carpet beneath the seat. Jonah always tried to imagine ways to lead dangerous people away from where they lived.

Even if all his maps somehow vanished, he'd memorized all the locations. He looked over them every morning. The real map was a convenient contingency and would be very useful if he ever had memory loss. The only way that would happen these days was if he were careless and fell and hit his head or if Doreen knocked him over the head with a cast-iron pan. For those reasons, he remained conscious of his footing while he walked outdoors but also conscientious of Doreen's feelings.

Regrettably the extended perimeter was the boundary of his knowledge

about where they lived. He had no choice about that for now. The cabin and a little farther were the farthest east he'd ever been. His unfamiliarity of the beyond kept him from exploring but might be necessary for survival in the future. Then there was always the obvious threat. His natural inclination to keep going and gain knowledge of the land was restricted—because protecting his people was paramount—and most of his familiarity was west. Living at the cabin was similar to living on an island. Temporarily, they had no choice but to stay put.

The extra work he did on the real map was also for Doreen and Heike if Jonah were ever killed, and anyone who discovered a fake map would not only deduce that whoever had drawn it was insane but would also be forced to give up in their searches because there was nothing to find. Well, technically there were in some places. Jonah had gone through the painstaking slog of digging and then placing empty tarps only two feet deep at random. The potential digger would conclude that someone had already been there and taken what had been buried, or they had taken what was there but reburied empty tarps.

Jonah had taken even more steps to ensure their property remained undiscovered. He'd placed weapons in bags, then waterproof tarps, and then buried them deep in the ground. Except the marks on the map weren't even accurate on the real one. The actual locations of the burial sites were thirty-one paces north, south, east, or west of the marks, depending on the direction leading away from the cabin. Doreen and Heike knew about that, and if they didn't care about him as much as they did, they would probably have deduced he was as crazy as the future trespassers—turned looters—he prepared for.

The thought of somebody, some asshole who thought he was about to find something of value, stumbling around, following a fake map, unable to find anything made Jonah laugh on occasion. Actually whenever he thought about it, he would laugh but would say, "Nothing," when Doreen asked what he was laughing about. He knew he was right on the cusp of becoming like all those people he'd heard about who lived in the woods for too long, paranoid lunatics, but because he was aware of what could potentially happen, he thought that made it so he could control his own sanity.

Use it even. So much of what could potentially be negative or dangerous could be used effectively if recycled the right way. Of course it would be an entirely different story if he didn't have Doreen and Heike in his life. He really might actually end up one of those crazy mountain people without them.

Alcohol and pills, with the exception of aspirin, he'd left behind, but he'd taken guns, ammo, cleaning kits, knives, explosives, food, gum, breath mints, fishing gear, bottled water, tools, clothing, tape, pens, paper, chem lights, chocolate, candy, first aid kits, weapon-cleaning kits, fuel, lighters, matches, condoms, or anything else of importance—especially coffee, paramount after quitting drinking and smoking. He remembered discovering a manual coffee

grinder and making a sound a happy toddler would make. He was thankful there had been no witnesses.

Those items weren't the only effects Jonah kept a lookout for. He also never missed an opportunity to bring back any card game or board game they could play as a family or that Heike could play on her own. Keeping Heike entertained was a major objective because Doreen often brought up that she didn't have anyone her age to play with. She had always been a gregarious little thing, and her sheltered life was a major concern. Doreen was correct to be worried. Being around people of the same age forced maturity and personal growth. He and Doreen were adults. They'd already been civilized normally.

If Heike weren't around kids her own age, it could limit her in adulthood. At least that was their fear. She would no doubt grow up to be a healthy, respectful adult, but being social helped a person become who they were meant to be and also helped them be happy. Isolation was unnatural for humans and was one of the downfalls of living in the remote Bavarian mountains, where winter was prevalent and might end up being the main reason they needed to leave one day. Further scouting well beyond his controlled perimeter would be necessary before that happened, though.

Heike liked to play, pretend, and be entertained—either with games or by conversation—and overall just stay busy, as most children did. All of those things plus doing chores, like dusting and stacking the wood that Jonah brought inside, took up most of her day. But it wasn't enough. How could it be? Heike, being only eight, was at the beginning of her life, and she had many interests. Fortunately, because of her young age, boys didn't preoccupy her mind.

Jonah didn't think so anyway. He hoped not. He wasn't ready to broach that subject, and hopefully it would be Doreen explaining those things to her. Except Doreen liked to include him in almost everything, so she might make him. He didn't have to worry about that right now. When that day arrived, he'd probably find a way to go hunt down some Molters instead. He'd much rather do that than be included in "the talk."

Jonah and Doreen had each other, and if Heike were older, things might be more complicated, but she seemed happy. Heike had her mom available whenever she needed her, and Jonah was her father figure, but one day she would no doubt want to meet someone special too. Everything they did was for her now.

Jonah had been alive long enough that pride took the place of regret, and he would do whatever was necessary, even if it meant sacrificing himself, to better their lives. He never revealed that to Doreen, but he was willing to die if need be. On a certain level, he was sure she knew, just as all women probably did. Every so often dying was a man's most important job.

Another way to keep Heike busy—in the future—was for Jonah to take her hunting with him. It had been only a suggestion thus far, but he was sure Doreen was close to deciding whether to allow her to go with him or not. Not

that Jonah minded hunting by himself. He liked to stay busy too.

Other than being there for his woman, he practically had a full-time job with everything else he was responsible for, what with exercising, listening to the radio, memorizing his map, gathering, hunting, and clearing—which consisted of destroying cocoons and killing Molters or Infectors or both.

The only task he didn't consider his was preparing meals. Doreen was the cook, and for that he was very, very grateful. There was nothing better than coming home after a long day, out of the chilly wet, bathing and getting warm and then getting some warm food in his belly. That set up the next best thing, which was going to bed and getting a full night's sleep.

Hunger interrupted sleep, but a consistently full stomach sure helped when his mind wasn't keeping him awake. In his past, sleeping all night long had proven decidedly difficult, so it was a testament to his health that he got plenty of rest and even occasionally slept in to around eight a.m., and the quality time was something Doreen seemed to appreciate.

Their daily routine was closer to that of early man than modern ones. It was what humans were really supposed to be doing anyway, hunting and gathering, and hunting was a skill that needed to be passed down. Fishing, too, but hunting was preferred. Fishing required immobility for far too long for comfort. It must have been a funny sight to see Jonah with a fishing pole in one hand and a shotgun in the other.

If Jonah were killed and something happened to Doreen, how would Heike survive? It was a question he was forced to ask himself. Sure, Heike was a smart little thing, and she could figure a lot of things out on her own, Jonah had no doubt about that, and starvation was a powerful motivator for anyone, but she was still just a young girl. Not even a teenager yet. Kids made mistakes, and if she were on her own, she could find herself in grave danger and very quickly.

Better she knew what she was doing before that could happen and was taught by someone who knew what they were doing. Jonah hoped Doreen would allow him to take her hunting soon. For Heike and for himself. He enjoyed side projects, and he wanted to teach her. He enjoyed passing on his knowledge to those who deserved to be taught or those smart enough to understand the value of the lessons, and he cared for Heike as if she were his own daughter. That made her his ideal pupil.

On this particular ridge—there were three he frequented, to clear by triangulation—he could see almost 360 degrees. It was just a question of how methodical he could be. He'd missed them before because the punctures of his shots were nearly impossible to see even when they did hit their marks. The bullets were absorbed by all the muck inside them. The enemy was almost always well hidden by surrounding branches heavily weighted with snow.

He hadn't come across a thermal scope, one that would show a heat signature, but they existed, so he hoped to find one someday. That kind of scope would be a game changer and help him locate the cocoons a lot faster. When newly formed, the egg shapes were easier to see because they were brighter in color. When they were close to bursting open and birthing the monstrosity from within, the skin of the cocoons were much darker.

Although he didn't do it very often, if he shined a flashlight beneath a cocoon at night, sometimes he saw the Behemoth within shifting around inside as if it were trying to get comfortable, and there were Infectors swimming alongside it within all the goop. He had to be extremely careful and not get too close because—depending on the Behemoth's maturity—its infectious stinger-equipped tail could turn him into a Molter, just like an Infector could. It eventually lost that ability as it aged and was only a weapon, but their tails were always dangerous. Jonah did his best to end them before they could be born in the first place.

Empty cocoons often looked like the shadowy wood of the trees they hung from. Could they form on something other than trees? Be born in a city? He'd had a bad dream once about buildings infested with bulging sacs on every floor, and they even hung off edges of roofs, cranes, and the top of skyscrapers. Questions about them plagued his mind, which was probably why he dreamed about them so much. He wished he hadn't. With how many formed near the cabin, he could only imagine the sheer number forming elsewhere in the world but also in undiscovered places.

Not many knew what Jonah did, how Behemoths were born from the atmosphere, but air quality was different throughout the world. It was hard to imagine a smoggy city as the ideal environment for them. If cities were a safe place, somehow, then they might move to one. There were no communications across great distances, not anymore, at least none that he had access to, so the only way to find out was to speak with those who knew firsthand, and that was a little difficult to do when secluded from what remained of society. Exploring the possibility of moving, into a city or anywhere else, was definitely on the horizon but would have to wait.

When Jonah had first begun clearing, he would look through the quick-release scope on the rifle, but his sight picture was limited, and he would have to locate the sacs again before taking a shot. Now before he picked up the rifle, he scanned using binoculars. He chose a point, a landmark he would remember, generally the same area to his left and then started painting the background, raising and lowering the magnified view while slowly moving it to the right.

After about a minute of examining trees, he spotted one. When he lowered the binoculars he couldn't see it with the naked eye. He was unsure if it was too far off to see clearly anyway or maybe he was beginning to get long in the tooth. It didn't really matter. He didn't have access to glasses. Maybe he should try on any pairs he came across from now on. Collect them, then test

which one improved his vision the most, and then if they helped him see targets from far away, he'd wear them.

"Damn eyesight."

When he looked through the binoculars again, it took him a few seconds, but then he saw the unmistakable, bulbous shape and bright-orange color that stood out among the creamy trees as if it were lit up from within. He carefully lowered the binoculars, let them dangle by the strap around his neck, and grabbed a tentpole, one of many he'd brought along for the specific purpose of identifying their locations. He had cut the poles in half and wrapped both ends with duct tape. He aimed one at the intended target and then placed it in the snow.

Jonah used to use one of his many compasses, but it was often difficult to get an exact reading on them. The needle bobbed around too much. It was annoying. His tentpole method worked better for him because he aimed them directly at the enemy. The only movement was from within the cocoons as they grew, up until he ended them with a shot from his rifle. He continued scanning.

After about a half hour—he didn't really pay attention to how long it took, though maybe he should for future reference—he located two more. The color of them, the bright orange, proved he was accomplishing his duty well because they'd only formed recently. He'd killed the others. When they were mature and close to being born, Jonah thought the yellowish sacs looked the color of rotten fruit.

Glancing down at the tentpoles and where they aimed, he spotted the cocoons through the binoculars once more. Then he grabbed the rifle that he'd carefully leaned against a stump after attaching the scope. The stubby tree hadn't been cut down; it had fallen naturally. That was comforting to him for some reason.

Knowing his ladies were probably awake by now and that the sound of the gunshots wouldn't bother them—the opposite, it was proof of his productivity and of him being alive—he lowered himself into the snow, thankful for the waterproof cold-weather clothing he wore. The jacket and pants weren't military gear; they were civilian but army green in color and just as reliable. The black stocking cap he wore kept his head warm, and the tan cold-weather shooting gloves made it so he didn't have to worry about frostbite.

As he brought the scope of the bolt-action rifle to his right eye, he closed his left and pulled the stock securely against his shoulder and settled his left elbow into the icy powder. He spotted the first one through the magnification and eased his trigger finger across the trigger guard. Then he gently looped it inside around the trigger itself, aimed below where all the shadowy tendrils were, the glistening noodles of organic matter that held it securely to the tree branch, and fired. The rifle kicked against his shoulder, and the echo of the shot broadcasted over the snowy peaks in the distance.

Stabilizing himself after the recoil from the rifle, he saw through the scope

that the cocoon hadn't fallen to the ground, but the gooey fluid within that kept the Behemoth safe and warm and nourished was leaking out like a water balloon that had sprung a leak.

Readjusting by opening his left eye to spot the next pole, he shifted his body, recocked the bolt, aware of where the empty casing ejected so he'd remember to collect them all before he left, aimed, found his target, and fired again. The second gunshot echoed as much as the first.

Jonah was an accurate marksman but not a great one. Even so he never wanted to waste ammo on target practice. An actual mission was his target practice. He had never located a silencer that fit the rifle he preferred for taking out cocoons, but he hadn't seen another person since they'd arrived, so he was somewhat comfortable going loud every once in a while. Especially when it was required, like when he unexpectedly needed to aim and pull a trigger.

It wasn't as if he had to clear every day, either, because it took a while, weeks, for Behemoth cocoons to grow. Even if someone did hear the shots, whether they had sinister intentions or noble ones or something in the middle, they would have difficulty pinpointing his exact location. He hoped that if any strangers showed up, they would be good people, but if they had ill intent, he would be ready for them too.

He scooted sideways to aim at the last one for the day. He recocked, forcing the empty casing to land near the other one, aimed, breathed in, then out, and squeezed the trigger. The rifle bucked, and the cocoon popped in the distance. He actually saw fluid squirt out through the scope.

"Gross."

The other shots had been cleaner, probably hitting them directly, maybe right in the head as he intended, but the last shot had obviously hit lower, in the body somewhere. Body shots also killed them, he knew, but he was never exactly sure where the bullets hit. It was difficult to see them within the cocoon while forming through all the tissue unless he was right under them at night and shining one of his high-powered flashlights. He did that only if he absolutely had to because venturing to cocoons beyond the ridges wasted too much daylight. Hiking to the ridges already took up a good part of the day, so shooting them from a distance was the most effective method to destroy them.

With the tentpoles in place, he would return in a few days—even if there was fresh snowfall, he could dig to find the poles—aim with his binoculars, spot where they'd been, and see if his shots had found their marks, searching for something similar to a deflated balloon. It was pretty obvious if he were successful or not because healthy cocoons looked like they were about to pop.

If he killed the Behemoth growing inside early enough, then the Infectors that swam within the sac wouldn't survive either. It just depended on how far along in the growth cycle it was. If cocoons shriveled up, then his shots were kills, and if they fell to the ground, either he missed, or they were born. That was why it was imperative his clearing was thorough. Failure might result in a

Behemoth outside their door.

Even if he destroyed them, once he returned to a ridge to check his shots, he still went through the same process with the binoculars to see if he spotted any more of them, ones he may have missed. Sometimes he spotted a new one forming, and it infuriated him that he hadn't seen it when he was out last. He was hard on himself because he needed to be, and there was a reason cocoons mostly grew in dense trees; they were the perfect place for Behemoths to remain hidden as they matured and were born safely. Jonah had learned that while observing the first cocoon he'd seen upon arriving at the cabin, when he'd set up explosives below it, and that excursion was one of the only secrets he'd ever kept from Doreen.

After he'd discovered it, the cocoon had burst open about two weeks later. With how fast they grew, he guessed it'd started forming a week or so before that. According to his approximation, most Behemoths cocooned for three weeks, maybe a month, before birth, so he had that long to destroy them. Even if it was a month, he gave himself only up to three weeks to be safe. The last sound he wanted to hear was the sickening belch of them splitting open.

Overlapping outings were extremely effective and decreased the probability of failure. He considered it a good day when he didn't leave any tentpoles. He'd never allowed a Behemoth to get close to the cabin and intended to keep it that way.

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CHAPTER 4

The ground suddenly shook beneath him so much that Jonah thought it was an avalanche for sure. Images of the snow blanketing the mountainsides, pouring toward him before he could escape, and of being covered up beneath tons of its slushy weight popped into his head. Avalanches were one of his biggest fears because they were out of his control. After a few seconds—which felt like minutes—the trembling passed.

Even if there were an avalanche nearby, there probably wouldn't be any danger from it at the cabin. Any unstable snow would cascade downhill, and the location of the cabin was elevated. It was one of its best features. Anyone or anything that wanted to reach it practically had to climb. Being on high ground was another advantage, a primitive defense, and ideal for the time they were living in. Unless somebody knew exactly where the cabin was located, it was difficult to find. Dense forest surrounded it, and trees and foliage provided natural camouflage.

The elevation allowed views on all sides after short to long hikes in any direction. Being high up in the mountains provided opportunity to spot incoming threats and prepare. Other than the occasional pack of Molters hunting in the distance, most were singles. Nothing Jonah's weapons couldn't take care of, and the more he cleared, the less of them showed over time.

After Jonah realized what had actually happened, the brisk clip of his heart rate slowed, and even though he was already going home, he decided to stay. If ground was unstable, he needed to know exactly where to avoid it in the future. He couldn't see what had happened under the snow. Whatever he'd heard had crumbled behind him and shortly after he'd stepped over it, so he backtracked, stepping safely to the right of the slope he had only recently hiked up.

The tremor or whatever it had been—likely caused by the weight of the wet, heavy snow—had lasted only a few seconds, but the ground had opened to reveal a cave. From the look of it, the entrance appeared to have been purposefully covered with tree branches, and then snowfall had inadvertently layered atop that. Man-made. That was probably why it hadn't held. It meant the cave had likely been a place someone lived in or considered a hiding spot. Jonah's weight had obviously been the catalyst, but he was glad he hadn't been directly on top when the blockage gave way.

Though it had been held in place by snow and ice, both had melted enough to break apart. Had he stepped on it directly, he probably would have fallen through, and the aftermath could have included all kinds of grisly possibilities involving landing on top of pointy things. The cave was too close to the cabin not to explore, and there was no stopping his curiosity. He removed the quick-release scope on his bolt-action rifle, which was useless at that range,

especially aimed into darkness, and shoved it into his cargo pocket. Then he aimed and waited. If something were going to attack him, it would probably happen shortly.

A few minutes passed without incident. He tapped his jacket and felt for the butt of his 9mm pistol in its holster under his arm inside his jacket, just to make sure it hadn't fallen out somewhere—a habit he'd gotten into, even though he'd never lost it. He rolled his backpack off his shoulder. Then he reached inside and pulled out a flashlight, transferred the scope from his cargo pocket to inside the backpack before pulling it back on and tightening the straps. The flashlight was the regular kind, one filled with large batteries. He clicked it on, pointing the flashlight under the rifle barrel to maintain his aim, and stepped inside.

There was only blackness as he stood there, but he knew that was because his eyes hadn't adjusted to the dark yet. He took a few steps forward and waited, doing his best to see what mysteries might dwell within without venturing in too far and feeling very aware of what might be lurking. There was a reason no one lived in there anymore. He felt a mixture of excitement and dread. Knowing what he knew, he was likely to discover something of use or something he feared.

"If you see 'em, kill 'em."

Getting a sudden feeling that was similar to being doused with ice water, Jonah stepped back out of the darkness and placed his rifle stock down in the snow next to the yawning mouth of the cave. If he got trapped or killed, another rifle would be handy for Doreen. Wouldn't want to waste a good rifle. If there were another cave-in, the place was close enough for her to find it, and she would be able to deduce what had happened. She knew his rifle. Knew his *many* rifles.

Not that he believed he was in any real danger, not at the moment, but Jonah dealt in contingencies. Every soldier learned that if something *can go* wrong *it will* go wrong. Best to be prepared for things to go south but thankful when they didn't.

After Oberstein, every cavernous place gave him worry because he knew what might consider it a good place for a lair or nest. Emerging to kill and feed made them vulnerable, so the creatures—including Infectors—were driven to find dark, dank places to hide because it meant they could rest safely when they weren't out hunting.

A Behemoth—after its own cocooning period—lived in the lair and waited for its minions, the Molters, to turn into cocoons for it to drink. The transformation the Molters went through was triggered after they fed at least three or four times and usually on humans. After that, they liquefied to become what a Behemoth considered fine dining. The thought made Jonah shiver.

After his eyes had adjusted enough in conjunction with the light he created, he shot the flashlight around quickly to see if it spurred a predator to move or,

worse, launch at him. He painted the empty space before him with the cone-shaped beam—low, high, left, then right—doing his best not to miss an inch. It was similar to the movements he made with binoculars when trying to spot Behemoth cocoons forming from the ridges.

Then he waited, noticing how many dust particulates shone wherever he aimed the flashlight. He wondered how much of it he was breathing in, concluded that it was at least a ton, and then wondered how healthy it was to breathe air that had been trapped for a long period of time. Since he didn't know, he decided, with an accompanying grin, that it was harmless.

While awaiting being attacked by a hungry pack, he also listened for any hint of them in case his initial scare tactic failed. It wasn't as if the light from a flashlight was intimidating unless the flashlight itself was about to be used to knock somebody over the head. There was always the chance the Molters—possibly only a few feet away—were smarter than him and their stillness was a trick to spur him forward into a planned ambush.

Intelligence was a trait he hoped they didn't possess and never would. He hoped they relied on primitive instincts and that the possibility of them being smart was only another fear of his. What was somewhat reassuring was that, in his experience, Molters and Behemoths typically behaved like normal predators. They capitalized on opportunity, attacked with force, and didn't lay traps.

As he took careful steps forward, the cave looked to be even deeper and more spacious than he'd initially realized, and he prepared himself for it to be as far underground as the entire country. It never hurt to expect the unexpected. The surprising emanating warmth made it likely that the underground space could have been someone's home, if it were accessible, and knowing that made exploring it worth the risk because there could be something of value within.

Something else of value, he thought. Considering all they had, and in comparison to others, Jonah was sure they lived like royalty. But it could also very well be the dwelling of one or more of *them*, and *they* could still be inside, frozen in that suspended hibernation stasis. If that were the case, it would mean humans had lived nearby but also recently, hence his caution. It wasn't as if a Behemoth had built the cabin. Jonah just didn't know when there had been previous occupants.

Molters were an easy kill when they were hibernating and even easier to kill while sleeping in a nest all piled on top of one another, each facing a different direction, ready to attack. One time Jonah had lobbed a grenade, and one of them had actually grabbed it—as if in defiance—and pulled it into the middle before they all erupted into bits and mist.

Jonah had never seen any nests near the cabin, probably because there weren't enough humans for them to prey upon. Nesting was likely something they did only while on more active hunting grounds. Even so, when dealing with them, it was wise to remember there were often more than one.

If there were any nests in there, it could explain how Molters often appeared near the cabin. It was always unexpected and seemingly out of nowhere, which could mean there were more caves like the one he was in. Whenever a Molter showed up inexplicably, Jonah took it rather personally because he worked so hard to eradicate them.

They're driven to find places like this.

Being overly cautious—paranoid—was a trait of his, he knew, but it was one of the reasons he'd survived so long. And he had the military and all its training to thank also. Anyone could potentially be a foe, and anywhere could potentially lead to danger, no matter how safe it seemed. Enemies were always near. It was only a question of proximity. It was a hard fact to accept but one best to remember. Those who survived learned to avoid the enemy altogether or learned the best way to kill them. Jonah did his best to practice both.

There was another shudder, and he held his breath for what seemed like an eternity. Dirt and rocks that made up the walls vibrated and shook, and the entrance suddenly disappeared from view as if a curtain had fallen across it, causing the light to vanish like a candle being blown out.

"Shit."

The branches and rocks and everything else he should have cleared out of the way completely before entering had fallen over and were now blocking the exit. The only exit that he was aware of.

Now that he was submerged in darkness again, the only light emanated from what he held in his hand, his hot breath filled the beam shooting from the flashlight, and he felt the cave suddenly get much cooler. He cursed again silently but then exhaled slowly, calming himself. The very thing he always feared—getting trapped somewhere and not being able to get back to his people—had happened.

Stupid. Stupid. Stupid.

After clicking the flashlight off, he closed his eyes and waited a good five minutes. While he did that, he combated the images of dozens of claws reaching for him to get him down on the ground and hold him there while sharp teeth bit into his flesh to feed on his blood along with all the many other things anxious to feed on what was left of him.

There was still only darkness when he opened his eyes again, but at least he could see shapes now. He could even make out the ground and the nearest wall made of rock. Faint light drew his sight to where the entrance had been. For some reason, seeing jagged lines of white made him feel warmer. Probably because it meant he could dig his way out when he had to. It might be difficult and zap his energy, but where there was light, there was a likely way out. The smart thing to do would be to start digging immediately. But why ruin the theme of the day? Also he couldn't shake the feeling that he was actually going to discover something important.

Look Doreen, Heike, I found an intact teleportation unit to get us out of

here. Now if I can just locate the manual. The sound of his own snickering magnified within the rocky space. *Give away your position, dummy. Smart.*

Although discovering something of worth wouldn't change his predicament, it might make the trouble he was in worth it. He would just need to make it out alive. No matter what he found, he needed to find a way out soon. There wasn't much daylight left. He should probably speed all of it up, do the searching, and then worry later. That way he could get back as soon as possible. He was already late, and he was pushing it by standing in place.

And he needed to remember that just because he had a plan to get out didn't mean that the plan would work. He had no idea how long it would take to dig his way through all the debris. Fortunately he was prepared. The entrenching tool, or e-tool as it was commonly called, a fold-up shovel, sure came in handy and usually when least expected. He had one in his backpack. He never would have guessed he would need to use one after he got kicked out of the military, and now he never went anywhere without one.

The e-tool was not only for digging and could even be used to chop through branches if necessary, even though that might take well into the night when clearing as much debris as what blocked the cave entrance. Even if he didn't have the e-tool, he had his machete. With night came the possibility of encountering the bloodsuckers, and he had only so much ammo. Except he knew that getting into trouble was often worth it.

"Isn't it just like you to push?" Jonah whispered to himself. "Why do you always gotta do that?"

Without answering his own question as a lunatic might—also out loud—he decided to answer himself in his mind where there was plenty of room for almost crazy.

Because there's something in here. And pushing it is how you've survived so long.

The only problem was he still found himself in danger on occasion, sometimes only temporarily, but temporary or not, it was long enough for *terrible* to happen. If he had only himself to worry about, that would be one thing, but Jonah wasn't on his own anymore. He would make sure it was like that for the rest of his life.

Plus, there had been too many times when he would not have discovered something important had he returned home early because he was tired or because it was easier than pushing it. Going past the state of comfortability was how the real work got done most of the time, and that was always well past the point of wanting to do it.

And he still couldn't shake that there was something nearby that he needed. He could sense it. He couldn't be sure what that was until it was discovered, but he'd been doing this whole survival thing long enough to know that ignoring a weird blip on his radar would be a mistake. The place had served a purpose, and he needed to find out what that was. Hopefully that would lead him to what he was after.

The obstacle was that he wouldn't know what he was after until he found it. Sometimes it was just another board game to keep Heike from getting bored. Everything Jonah did was to better their lives, though, even the little things and even if it ended up killing him. Most likely his risky choices would only almost kill him, and fortunately he was in the best end-of-the-world shape he'd ever been in.

Don't laugh out loud at your own joke. That's a one-way ticket to crazy town, just as Doreen says. Plus you'll give away your position.

Jonah successfully stifled the laugh that was bubbling to the surface, still under control but nearly spilling out anyway. The joke about going crazy was just that, a joke, a private one that he shared with Doreen because they were both aware that present circumstances were ideal for someone to lose their mind. He had been through enough—and unaccompanied long enough—to know that he wouldn't go nuts easily. Hopefully it would not happen at all, but he was smart enough to remember how fragile humans could be. Whether he liked it or not, he was human, too, so he could eventually lose his mind just as others who had been secluded for too long, no matter how strong his will.

If he lived to be an old man, there was no telling what illnesses might slow him down. He was confident in his physicality as long as he didn't get seriously injured, but it was impossible to know the future of the mind. It wasn't as if he could get checked out at the local doctor's office. All of that equipment, the complex machines used to identify human ailments, was useless for the time being. Probably just collecting dust or even snow if the hospital was in Europe and there was a hole in the roof. It was hard to imagine there could be a place on earth that was warm with clear blue skies overhead because snow had been their world forever. This winter had been a long one.

Because you're in the German mountains.

The present truth of his immediate predicament was that if he didn't get back before nighttime, Doreen might go out searching for him, no matter how much he'd stressed not to if he went missing. She was always made aware of the general direction he was headed and would bring Heike along, too, for fear of leaving her behind. It would be too dangerous. He would do the same if he were in her shoes, not that he would allow Doreen to go out on missions by herself, but his deadline for concluding his search and finding a way out was dark.

Doreen had been a soldier too. He hadn't forgotten, and she could handle herself in any situation the world could throw at her, but to Jonah, she was his woman first. Protecting her and Heike was all that mattered to him. He would remember to have a discussion with her if something like this happened again. There needed to be a broad plan for his missions, always, encompassing when or if they went wrong, and a predetermined time for him to return was paramount.

After that he was on his own, and she needed to understand that. He would make her promise him for the future. Hopefully it would never be necessary.

He just had to think about it more. He would discuss it with her later. They would figure it out together. And when he got back today—realistically tonight, no matter his confidence, he would probably be somewhat late—he would be honest with her and tell her what happened. That way they could discuss it, maybe even include Heike, and prepare so it wouldn't happen again. But also prepare if it did. Jonah always did his best to stay motivated, especially considering his past.

Staying motivated was one thing, but being overconfident was something very different, and that had gotten him into trouble before. No matter how much experience was under his belt, he should have anticipated a predicament such as this. He had been cautious for the most part, but that caution and keeping it in mind should have prevented it altogether.

Suddenly he felt his old way of thinking creeping in, a growing depression, like his mind was tied to weights dropping to the bottom of a lake, but he zapped it away just as quickly. He did his best not to think that way anymore.

"No time for it."

Reassured there was a way out, and relatively sure he wasn't—presently—about to be attacked, no matter his fears, he clicked the flashlight back on and threw it around as he stepped forward onto the damp, rocky ground, finally catching a clear glimpse of the rear of the cave, or where he believed it to be. Squinting, he felt chills suddenly slither down his spine after he saw the slightest movement.

Freezing in place so as not to draw attention to himself, in case it wasn't only his imagination, he waited, and while he did, he hoped he'd been wrong. That it had been his imagination. But there was something off. He had seen something that glistened in a way that was familiar, in a way that tightened a trigger finger. It might be the reflection of melting snow or ice, which could have given the illusion of movement.

One thing going for him was that it was completely silent—Molters made a lot of noise—so he ventured further inward. Establishing cleared territory, he aimed the flashlight deeper into the darkness. Then he froze again. Sometimes Jonah hated it when he was right.

There were three of them.

He passed the flashlight to his left hand, unzipped and reached within his jacket, and yanked the 9mm out of its holster, silencer already attached. Creeping closer he placed the flashlight over the pistol. Then he moved his finger inside the trigger guard and placed it on the trigger itself, ready to squeeze, and shoot what would sink its teeth into his flesh if they got the chance. Also if they were awake.

Hanging upside down like others he'd seen, their knees were brought to their chests and their clawed hands and feet were pushed together, connecting them to the ceiling. He always thought it looked like they had attempted to touch their toes but had gotten frozen in place. He'd seen Molters that way before, but he'd just assumed it was because of the extremely low

temperature. Still something seemed off about them somehow, but he wasn't sure what.

Then he noticed that one of them looked slightly different than the others. It had so many teeth that they even sprouted out the sides of its mouth, and its skin was green. Most Molters were pale. Was it deformed? He squinted, doing his best to see it clearly. It didn't look to be. Instead it actually looked like a better, scarier, and improved version of what he knew.

Were they evolving? He quickly realized that, yes, they were. Of course they were. Evolution was probably unavoidable considering how quickly they'd showed up in the first place. He just hoped a new strain wasn't somehow deadlier than the others. Jonah had already assumed there were more strains but only because he was afraid of that possibility.

All three remained completely motionless. They should have already turned into cocoons and liquefied, becoming food for a Behemoth, but they hadn't. They were probably hibernating because when they did cocoon to become Behemoth food, they hung by their feet only and slowly transformed. Jonah shined the flashlight upward to inspect the residue pooled over the hands and feet.

The substance that held them in place—typically when they cocooned until a Behemoth drank them—resembled hardened, clear glue, but Jonah rarely saw live Molters that way. Instinct aimed pistol and flashlight deeper into the darkness, and he hoped he wouldn't see giant legs scrambling toward him or hear a familiar hiss. Nothing, though.

After aiming the light over every inch of the rear of the cave, he realized it was only him, the three Molters, and what looked like had once been a homeless camp. There were boxes, ones he would search through soon, some chairs, and sleeping bags thrown open as if whoever slept in them last had thrown them off during the middle of the night and in a hurry.

People had definitely lived in here, but now they were likely the ones that had molted and were hanging from the ceiling. They might have been the ones who had lived at the cabin or even built it. Someone had planned on living there awhile. The tempered glass of the woodstove inside proved it, and the cabin and outhouse were obviously there before the Molting.

Perhaps the Behemoth the Molters served had been killed? Would that interrupt the cocooning process for them? Maybe. What they had done at Henrytown—using remains to repel—had disrupted their natural lifecycle. Jonah had killed many Behemoths since arriving at the cabin, most of them the unborn that grew inside cocoons but a few adults as well. He didn't know all the after effects. He could think about how and why there was no Behemoth later.

Creeping as close to them as he felt comfortable, he shot the first Molter in the head. The silent *crack* of the silencer was almost as loud as a regular gunshot. The Molter didn't even open its eyes. Blood oozed out of the hole in its head. Jonah was moving to the second Molter when he saw the third's jaws

open followed by its eyes beneath them. He quickly aimed and shot it second, extinguishing a low growl.

His breath quickened as he aimed at the second Molter again, after seeing the third one die the same way as the first. He pressed the silencer to the head of the remaining Molter. It was the green one with no lips and all the extra teeth. Then he tapped against its skull until its eyes opened.

"You're not going to beat us."

It struggled against its natural binds, and just as it broke a clawed hand free, Jonah shot it. He took steps back as blood dripped from all three dead Molters, creating a steaming pool of it on the ground. His nose wrinkled from the awful stench of the mutated blood, somewhere between garbage and feces, he thought. They were a different species, something very alien to humans, and an enemy. Being a natural enemy was probably why they smelled so bad to him.

Maybe Infectors got in after the people got trapped by a cave-in or something, he wondered, and then they molted and hibernated. None of the Molters should still be inside the cave though. Not with those claws. They should have left for better hunting grounds or cocooned and already been drunk by a Behemoth. He guessed what they secreted to hang from above was either to cocoon or hibernate.

Again he thought maybe the Behemoth they were linked to had been killed, maybe even Jonah had killed it, and the Molters had been waiting, unable to cocoon, evolving in unnatural ways, like what had happened at Henrytown. The unknown, that there was something of importance close by, still tugged at the part of him that was curious. But he decided to think about all of it—and possibly figure it out—later.

"Time to go."

He never wanted to leave Doreen and Heike vulnerable for longer than he had to. They were always more important. The cave wasn't going anywhere, and he could come back. His intent for the cave would be on pause, like pushing the button on a remote control while watching a television program. Too much daylight was gone already. He didn't check his watch because it didn't matter; his internal clock let him know he could freeze to death if he were trapped for long enough.

And it wasn't as if he could light a fire to keep warm, even though he had a lighter on him and always did. There were other ways to make fire, but he could never have too many lighters. The problem was where would the smoke go? Sure there were ripples of light in crevices he couldn't see clearly, but the smoke would likely only go in one direction, and that was directly into his lungs. A fire just for warmth was too risky. Nope, in order not to freeze to death, he'd have to warm himself up the old-fashioned way.

Doreen was going to be worried about him no matter what. Regardless of what she was struggling with—in the ballpark of postpartum depression—and how she was currently feeling about Jonah, she didn't like to be apart from him. He was her man but also one of her ties to society. Other than her daughter, Jonah was the only person in her life, and people needed to be around other people for their own health.

Jonah didn't like to be apart from Doreen, either, even if she'd been down lately. Doing his best to understand all of that meant he would be ready for however she reacted. Every now and then, she was angry. From the way his clothes were all coated with dirt and grime and wet as if he'd been rolling around in a coal mine, he could only imagine how dirty his face was. Though he was unable to see it, it was surely as darkened with dirt as his clothes were.

After digging as he'd planned—chopping and scraping with the e-tool—it was easier to get out than he'd feared it would be. He'd remembered to grab the rifle before heading for home, the faint, shadowy remains of the day only glimmering over the horizon in the distance as if the sky were squinting and moments away from night's slumber itself.

When he returned, with the cabin in view, he heard the door open and saw Doreen emerge from within. Although she'd been waiting impatiently, her immediate relief was apparent. She inhaled and exhaled while her eyes closed, which made Jonah feel good, but then they popped open. She had almost smiled before frustration took over. She was probably thinking, *What happened? Is everything all right? Why were you gone so long? I was very worried . . .*

He'd heard it all before and didn't blame her a bit as he crunched across the frozen snow, anxious to get inside and get warm but also alleviate her worry. And it was always nice to see her. He loved her but also thought Doreen was such a beauty.

She stood half in the doorway and half on the porch, as if she were thwarting a young girl from escaping, a habit from when Heike was young, or she was doing her best to prevent the heat from getting out. He noticed how much snow topped the cabin.

Before reacting to how Jonah looked, she said, "Any sign of him?"

Doreen had her good days and her bad days, and lately most had been good. This was definitely one of them because she was optimistic and asking about her father. She hadn't mentioned Henry in a while, and that meant it had been a few weeks at least, and Jonah appreciated that she never gave up hope. He wished he felt the same way.

"No," he said as upbeat as possible.

When Doreen asked that question, it always sounded like she was asking it for the first time, so Jonah forced himself to respond the same way. He didn't want to give away how he really felt—angry—because there was no point in discussing it anymore. Henry was missing or worse.

While Jonah felt that familiar pull toward his woman, up the step and near

the door, he saw the regular battle women often had with their men, which was frustration versus love. Before she could begin the former, he kissed her, extinguishing a “where” or a “why” or a “what,” and she actually kissed him back.

It felt so good to be welcomed home. Sometimes she wasn’t as happy to see him. At least he felt that way. When he stepped away, she gave him a smirk, and then they went inside.

The door to the cabin was supposed to remain shut for the night, but it opened again, and Jonah scrambled back onto the porch, nearly slipping and falling on his ass.

“Careful. It’s dark out,” she said from within.

“I can still see. I’ll be quick,” he said.

“Please don’t break both your legs.”

“OK.”

As Jonah grabbed the readily available shovel, he saw frustration replace whatever had been on Doreen’s face as she closed the door. He would make it up to her when he went back inside. Gazing up, he saw there was far too much snow on the roof. The weight could cause it to collapse because the architect hadn’t been top tier, and Jonah didn’t want anyone to eat a plate of snow for their next meal. Or get buried while sleeping.

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CHAPTER 5

The Draw hadn't selected someone many would call a friend for a while. Almost everyone had breathed a sigh of relief when Wayne had captured the guy from before, the one who'd tried to kill him for the supplies he had on him: a revolver and a bottle of water. They hadn't even known his name. Because it hadn't mattered. Someone of low moral character, like a murderer or a potential one, made it easier to choose because he would never be allowed to join them and, because of that, could never be beneficial to the group. Except for being put in a cell.

Most accepted their fate because death was often the easier choice. Difficult to escape from an enclosure while guarded. Some tried to get away before that happened, but most never got far. Otto had gotten the farthest. Everyone seemed to like him, but he had no skills, none that helped anyone—other than his upbeat attitude—and he couldn't even shoot straight. Those who couldn't be relied upon to use a gun were deemed worthless by Archard.

Frox agreed, except everything went smoother when someone unfamiliar was chosen over someone whose past, friends, or family were known. When the Draw happened that way, it made it harder on everyone. Most seemed to pity Otto, the man who was in the cell, even some who didn't appear to have emotions at all, and even some of them had wondered aloud if it would be them next.

The cells were enclosures, portable jails, and Archard had already possessed them when they met. Frox knew them intimately, and because of that, he never asked where Archard had obtained them. But they looked as if they'd been taken from a local prison. They were used to transport inmates for reasons Frox didn't care about, and they suited as a cornerstone of their methods just fine.

Archard had mentioned it was possible that a stranger could join them and then rank past those who'd been with them for a while. Even though it hadn't happened yet, Frox was open to it. He did not think it likely, but he was open to it. If it did happen, though, it would mean the person was a crack shot and could shit matches.

"You sure about this?" Perry said next to him.

Frox held the binoculars tight, his tunneled view on the cell. Without looking, he said, "About what?"

"*How* we're doing it."

Of course Frox wasn't sure. "Orders," he said.

"Yeah, Archard's."

"And?"

"Never so close to home."

"With Wayne gone, it changes things. You nervous?"

"Yeah. Mortars make me feel safer."

"Then the howitzers must really make you feel relaxed."

"They do. Not that I can't shoot."

"I know that."

What they were doing there had happened only at the firing line so far, and Perry was right to be wary. Frox was, too, but it was best to exhale with annoyance as often as possible to dissuade Perry from being anxious. Frox was too tired to supplicate his right-hand man into being on board completely, something that didn't seem entirely possible. Lowering the binoculars, Frox looked to his left, then up at Perry.

Perry had a thick salt-and-pepper beard that grew far up his cheeks. He held an assault rifle close to his slim stomach, beneath his barrel chest. The handle disappeared within a hand so large it practically looked swollen, and whenever he placed his finger on the trigger, it filled up the inside of the trigger guard.

Not that Perry needed a gun. He was huge, taller than everyone at the fort he'd named after himself but also everyone else. He could probably kill almost anyone if he caught them by surprise and got hold of them, so it was strange to sense he was spooked. It was as if Frox were witnessing a nervous grizzly bear. It was understandable because it wasn't people that caused Perry to worry, but whatever Frox silently communicated made him regain his bearing.

"I'm good, man," Perry said. "Just like to talk is all. Voice what's going on in my head."

"Yeah, I know you do."

Perry snorted. Frox raised the binoculars again and shivered. He was chilled, even though he wore a warm weatherproof jacket. It was as if his skeleton were made of soaked wood instead of bone. He couldn't seem to get warm no matter how many layers he wore. It occurred to him he had worn the same underwear and socks for the last two days so that probably had something to do with it. Regularly changing clothes helped a person stay warm, but it was winter, and he was outside most of the time. What could he do?

Frox chose the same jacket hunters wore, a blaze orange so strangers wouldn't shoot him thinking he was a deer or something other than human. A downfall of the color was that it was similar to Behemoth cocoons at a certain time in their development. As long as Frox didn't go climbing around in trees, he would be safe. With Molters about, everyone had itchy trigger fingers, so it was safer to be more noticeable. Another reason to wear a bright color was so others could find him quickly when needed, which seemed to be more often than he would have liked, but Frox understood; he reported directly to Archard.

Perry typically didn't question Frox, but lately he had been doing it more often. Maybe it was because of how tired Frox was lately and how all pack

leaders, animal or man, got challenged eventually. Frox knew Perry wouldn't betray him. They weren't just coworkers in the new world; they were friends, too, but poor sleep and the stress of what was demanded of him probably made Frox look as weak as he felt. Friends or not, they were both in charge of other lives. Protecting them and taking them.

It didn't help that Frox was on the shorter side at five feet seven inches. Any dummy a few inches taller usually didn't respect him until they got to know him, and his patience for confrontation got lesser the older he got. Frox had maintained a long mustache for decades and shaved the rest of his face, but because he hadn't gotten much sleep lately, he had foregone his habit of shaving every day. It gave him an unkempt look and displayed a stressed demeanor that the others seemed to be picking up on. It wasn't only Perry who had noticed.

And Frox was stressed, for many reasons, but it was mostly from the voting. It wasn't something any of them ever wanted to do, of course, except for maybe a few with grudges who coincidentally got to decide on someone they didn't like. But that hadn't happened this time. The system was necessary, but that didn't make it easy, even though, other than Archard, Frox was its main supporter.

And enforcer. Because it made sense. It wasn't as if any of them were new to it. Many of them were allowed a vote and understood why, but the process had been more necessary lately because their numbers were dwindling. Friends of friends were being picked. That would sour anyone's mood.

More accurately, the Draw had chosen them, but that was because they'd captured only one Molter alive this time. The task was nearly impossible anyway, and the man who was best at it had gotten himself killed recently in an attempt. What was left of Wayne had been discovered after somebody tripped over his hand still sticking up out of the ground. The Molter responsible for draining him had buried him, as they did. Since then, the cells had needed human occupants quite regularly, especially on the firing line. Frox never would have guessed that Wayne's death, the death of just one man, would result in the need for so many more to die.

The only part of their system that gave Frox comfort was that he knew he wouldn't be a vote any time soon, unless he committed a serious crime, which he wasn't about to do. The higher-ups of the community were deemed important, and Archard considered Frox to be one of them. That and they still numbered in the hundreds.

Perry had nothing to be nervous about, either, but he was still nervous about it. Maybe he was correct to be because, really, how long could they actually go on like this? The biggest downfall of not being chosen was having to live with the decision, witness the looks and see the tears. Not just from those who were going to die but from those who couldn't handle it. A few had killed themselves, adding to the number lost.

Another downfall of living was knowing you would have to witness a lot

more die. Many Frox knew well. Lately he felt like he knew everyone better than he wanted to, especially because some of them would eventually end up chosen, but knowing what would happen in the future was impossible. He had to remember that. He also had to remember that the Draw had been implemented only within the last few years so it was possible to end it just as quickly. Probably not any time soon and that fact was mostly accepted by those who wanted to live. It was always a relief when they made a new enemy. It made the next Draw so much easier.

Archard always chose the group of men. Only men were picked. None who were chosen were told they were a vote, and the ones who got the most votes were informed right before they were taken to a cell. Most of the time, only one man was needed for the Draw, but recently the system had expanded beyond the firing line to Fort Perry. If an enemy presented himself, then he would almost definitely be the result of the next Draw, unless he was a pilot or had some other skill considered useful by Archard in the future.

When someone had suggested they throw women into the mix, Archard had decked him. His anger hadn't needed to be explained. Human numbers diminished every day. The more women kept alive, the better for the species, for obvious reasons. Still, Frox wondered if there would be a day when even women might be considered. Even by Archard and especially if there was a day when there were no men left. If that day arrived, then they were all probably doomed.

Yes, much easier to choose when there was some animosity toward those chosen, if they were the obvious choices because they were thieves or murderers. Unfortunately that wasn't the case with the poor son of a bitch below them.

"Did you like him?" Perry said.

Frox didn't want to say, so he didn't because it didn't matter, but when he lowered the binoculars, he saw, out of the corner of his eye, that Perry was about to ask again. "Does it matter?"

"Just want to know is all."

"Yeah."

"Me too. Otto, he was a good man."

Frox exhaled. "Yeah, good but useless."

Perry reacted as if Frox had said that Perry was useless, but Frox paid it no mind. No matter how disturbed he seemed, Perry understood. Frox abided by the rules set forth by Archard and implemented them with immediacy. It pained him to lose people in any way but particularly by this method because he couldn't show how he really felt. Frox personally hadn't had any trouble with anyone who had been chosen so far, but any faltering, any taking of sides, could splinter the community.

Different groups often saw the other as the enemy, and they couldn't have that. Sure, it would make the voting easier, but the fear of whoever could be next, and the thought that it was only those who everyone deemed the most

unworthy and contributed the least who would be chosen, kept them all together. It kept everyone motivated to do as much as possible and do the right thing. Everyone knew what had sparked the first Draw: some fools trying to steal gasoline.

Those under Archard were a mix of locals and people from far away, but none of that mattered anymore. They were all practically foreigners because hardly anybody knew each other. Not really. Everyone had changed after the Molting, and some had needed to get to know themselves, discover who they were deep down. What was interesting was how some of the most respected people turned out to be weak or even useless, while others who didn't stand out in any way rose and became leaders. Frox liked to think he'd been one of those people.

The days leading up to the Draw were chaotic because everyone seemed to know it was about to happen. It wasn't like people kept their thoughts to themselves. Paranoia ensued, and some individuals pointed fingers, accused one another as children did, often to the bewilderment of those who the fingers were being pointed at. Mostly the accusations were made up, anything to take the heat off the ones in the hot seat, for this reason or that. It was all a very messy business.

The earth had changed, drastically, and not for the better. Humans were no different than any other desperate animal now and no longer at the top of the food chain, ruling as they saw fit. No, now they were practically prey animals, like common deer, and if they didn't go through with the Draw, they'd all die, in one way or another, sooner or later, whether it be by teeth or bullets. Frox truly believed that. It was an unfortunate predicament, but he knew there was no way around it.

Their way had held them off so far, but he was only human and stretched to his limits. He'd been doing his best to hide his fatigue for days, masking it with anger and frustration at others, the perfect cover for someone who felt out of control. He felt he'd aged years in only the last few weeks. One of the reasons was that the creatures had been so persistent in their attacks lately; incidents had really amped up in a noticeable way, which was why they had no choice but to do at Fort Perry, a place many had considered home, what they'd done only at the firing line so far.

Archard had mentioned he might command Perry to build another fort, not as another quarters but specifically for the Draw. That way somebody wouldn't be pulled from the sanctity of their dwelling and forced into a cell. They would be transported there. It was an incredibly difficult position to be in, for everyone, chosen or not, so at least another fort built for that specific purpose would have no illusions.

The real enemy attacked night *and day* as if the creatures sensed that Archard and his people—whether they were ex-soldiers, hostages, prisoners, families, whatever they actually were—were the last humans alive. Figuratively it was game time, and the last few minutes—the next battles—

would determine the winner.

Frox cupped his hands together, blowing hot air into them. Then he let his annoyance show because he could sense Perry's ambivalence. "We got no choice. It's either this or what?" Perry made a noise, the beginning of something said when caught off guard, but Frox didn't let him answer. "Because of Archard, we're alive, and we'll stay that way as long as we continue . . . *this*."

Perry only cleared his throat and coughed. He knew it was true. Archard had joined communities together, gathered powerful weapons and those who knew how to operate them, and set forth a plan of action that had kept them all alive.

Well, not everyone but almost.

Because of enemy numbers—and it being impossible to know what those numbers actually were—and there being no communication with the rest of the planet, it was also impossible to go much farther than the firing line. The Draw was essential. The only other option was for people to go out on their own, and anybody who did that usually wasn't heard from again. They probably didn't live longer than a few weeks.

Staying together was the best way to preserve what remained of the human species, even though what they did would no doubt be considered murder by most. Molting or expiring from exposure was no way for a man to die, but it was the best way to accelerate the inevitable. It allowed them to control what would happen anyway. Molters attacked viciously, whether they were lone hunters, in a pack, or en masse.

"I know all of that," Perry said with more attitude than ever, "but . . . Shit. I forgot what I was going to say."

Good, Frox thought.

"Hey," Perry said. "I haven't seen Otto move for a while."

"Stop saying his name. It doesn't matter anymore," Frox snapped.

"How am I supposed to refer to him?"

"I know who you're talking about, so just say *him*, or *he*, or *whatever*."

"Fine. I haven't seen *him* move in a while. And I still don't think we should do this so close to home."

"This isn't our home anymore."

"Sure it is. I sleep here. So do you."

"I can't think of it like that, especially now, and would you be moving in this weather?"

"He hardly said anything after they brought him back. Did the others get rounded up? The ones who ran off like him?"

"Yeah. They're at the firing line."

"Oh. Good. One's enough here. After they put him inside, he did a lot of hollering, for obvious reasons. I would, too, if one of them were in there with me, but he never complained about the cold."

Frox laughed. "Why would he care how cold it is? There was a Molter in

there with him. Besides he was a local. They're used to the weather."

"I don't think anybody ever gets used to this kind of cold. Look, I get what we do. There's them down there once it takes place"—Perry pointed with one of his baseball mitt–size hands and then thumbed at himself—"and we're up here, which makes us the good guys or whatever. But not everything goes according to plan, and I think an Infector bit him."

"What's the difference?"

"It wasn't planned."

"What's your point?"

"I don't know. He was supposed to stay human until it fed."

"It wouldn't."

"I still don't understand that. Then they come later, which we're ready for. For now, though, I'm thinking he's not moving because he got bit, not because he's freezing to death. And I just feel like we're trying to control something uncontrollable."

"We are. But there's nothing else we can do besides run. I don't want to do that, do you?"

"Nah, 'course not."

"Infectors are sneaky bastards. I didn't see it, but if they're close, they'll just do what they do. Not exactly what we intended but sometimes it is, and . . . all that matters is there's someone in the cell."

"He's not going to be a *someone* for long."

"Well, we wanted a Molter in there."

"We should just put him out of his misery. I've seen them attracted to dead men before."

"He knew what his fate would be once that door shut. After that, what's it matter? Otto—*fuck* . . . that man was supposed to be its food. But it wouldn't feed on him."

"But why? Never seen that before."

"I have no idea. It wasn't even interested in him. It was so, so strange."

When Otto had been forced inside the cell, a Molter had already been in there too. They wanted to keep the Molter fed and active to draw more in. The task had always been accomplished by Wayne—before he got himself killed—and this time it had taken nearly twenty men to do what he used to do alone. Typically a Molter sunk its teeth into whoever was put inside with it immediately. That was when it was easiest for those in charge. That way the men and women tasked with guarding a cell and getting ready for what happened next wouldn't have to listen to the person pleading for someone to let them out.

"It didn't even care about him," Perry said, his eyes getting huge, "all it wanted was to get up here."

The Molter had stared up at the top of the fort for days and even a short while after Otto had been put in with it. Before they'd had to kill it, it had started digging. None of them had done that before, ignored a chance to drink

the blood of a human, which made it even more difficult on everyone. Otto's pleading had been almost unbearable, especially because it'd lasted through the night. Frox had almost wished the forthcoming battle would happen sooner.

The Molter had seemed to want to destabilize the fort, or at least that was what Frox was afraid of, but did they actually want anything? Other than to kill and feed? Regardless, they definitely couldn't have one of them running around. Even if it disappeared into the distance, far into the trees, it would likely return and most likely with others of its kind. Once Molters knew people were present somewhere, that place became somewhere to hunt. Or a killing ground.

"Poor bastard," Perry said. "I wish it would have just killed him quick so we didn't have to hear him."

I wish that too. "There has to be an occupant. Man or Molter or both until one is dead." Frox shook his head. "I have no idea why they do what they do, but one thing I do know is they're drawn to each other."

"I know why we do this, and I don't need a biology lesson, but you weren't here the whole time when it was looking up at me. It didn't *care* about him."

Frox suspected he had more to say. "Explain."

Perry took off his brown stocking cap and rubbed a big, calloused hand across his head with a *scrape*. Perry shaved his scalp with a long knife and hot water every few days. He often had nicks and cuts all over, as he did now. Then he pulled the woolly cap back on tight. "It was like it was only interested in other people it could feed on, us, and *if it escaped*. We had to put it down. We never had to do that before." Perry squinted. "Did you see that? He just . . ."

"What?"

"Moved."

"So?"

"Did you see it?"

"No, I was looking at you." Frox raised the binoculars.

"He might still be human."

"Impossible. He's been in there too long. I think you're right. An Infector must have bit him."

"They freak me out, man. They're smart too."

"Infectors?"

"Yeah."

"No, they're not. You're just being paranoid."

"That's why I'm still breathing. I couldn't be sure with him all slumped over like that. And you took the binoculars with you when you got something to eat. That's when I saw him twitch before."

"Does it change anything?"

"Well, no. I just like to feel in control. I hate being surprised."

"No matter what happens to him now, it's how it should be. He's in that

cell, and he's not getting out."

"I just wish you could corroborate it so I'd be sure. So I know I'm not going nuts."

"You're not. And a man's gotta eat."

"Tell me about it. You should have left the binoculars with me, though. You always have them even if you don't need them."

"They're mine."

"What good they do you while you're getting some grub? Just saying. You should start handing them off."

Frox felt like he'd had the same argument before. Except he'd been ten, and one of his childhood friends had been mad at him for not sharing. "All right, all right. I'll leave them with you from now on. Man, I'm tired."

"I feel like I could hibernate until next winter, and we'd both be asleep already if things hadn't gotten all fucked up. The battle would probably be over by now. Gotta hit the sack soon, man. Why can't things go right when you really need them to?"

"I don't know."

Both stared down at the man in the cell, the man whose name they didn't want to think about, the current result of the Draw. None of them felt good about it, not them, or any of the armed men and women farther down the wall to their left and right, or anyone else at Fort Perry. None of them were monsters, but they had to do this because of real ones.

Wayne, before he died, had been skilled at tracking people as well as trapping Molters. Archard had picked a replacement, but he had already gone and got himself missing. Probably molted, came back, and somebody killed him already.

"I think some Molters are smarter than others," Perry said.

Frox humored him because he knew Perry would never stop talking. Although it was a bit annoying right now, it was one of the reasons Frox liked him so much. He was always thinking. Kept things interesting for both of them. Most of the time. In a way it was like being bored at any regular job, and conversation was often the best way to pass the time. What Perry had said was a disturbing thought, though.

"Like people can be," Perry said.

"They're not as smart as us," Frox said.

"No, but I mean how some people are smarter than others. That has to be possible, right? Doesn't that make sense?" Perry looked like a scared child who wanted his mommy to make him feel better. "Something was up with that one in the cell. I'm telling you. It looked different than the others too. It was green instead of pale pink or white or whatever they usually are. Did you notice?"

"Yeah. Maybe it was older than the others. Maybe they turn green if they live long enough. And the longer an animal lives, the more it can change physically."

"And is better at hunting. How much more older could it be?"

"I don't know. Only a few months. Maybe years."

"They all cocoon after a certain amount of kills, right?"

"Yeah, but maybe it only had to feed one more time before it did that, but it didn't happen because we trapped it."

"You know what I think?" Perry said and waited.

Frox chuckled. "You're going to tell me anyway, so you might as well say what you're going to say."

"They're different now. Not all of them . . . but some. They don't all look the same anymore. Not to me anyway. I think they're changing."

Frox didn't know what agreeing with Perry would accomplish. Neither of them were positive about anything. "I don't want to talk about this shit anymore. Look, if he"—Frox nodded toward Otto—"doesn't molt or ends up being dead and there is no battle, we'll just do it all again."

Perry exhaled with disgust. "The man in charge will have to give us a list of new names."

"Let's not get ahead of ourselves."

"What a pain in the ass all this is. They'll probably run too."

Frox felt a pit form in his stomach. "Nobody wants to get overrun. It's why we do it. It keeps their numbers under control."

Perry's response was only another exhale that turned into a growl. They had to survive. The aftermath wasn't talked about openly, but many hinted at how once this was over, if it happened, if it was even possible, that normal, whatever that was for anyone with their own skin on their backs, would never be the same.

That may be true, Frox thought, but grilling beef on any afternoon any day of the week would sure be good therapy, and that meal would probably never taste so good to him.

Discovering the inner self, the one who was really behind the hands on the clock, could be surprising. Frox was fascinated that he could be in charge of someone so much bigger and stronger than him. If Perry wanted to, he could grab Frox or practically anybody and kill them with his bare hands. But then someone else would be in Perry's shoes, and Perry would have to deal with the consequences. He would likely find himself one of the men chosen by Archard. Murderers were always a part of the next Draw.

Frox shivered, saw Perry take notice, as if he were surprised, but neither said anything about it. Frox had eaten recently after all. He usually got cold after a meal, no matter how many layers he wore. Difficult to avoid winter, and its partner, wicked wind, and both seemed to take joy in their attempts to chill humans to the bone.

Each person on guard held either a bolt-action rifle or an assault rifle. American or Russian weapons left over from bases scattered over Deutschland. Although some bases still had weapons, quite a few had been cleaned out. It was as if someone had known where it all was and had been

anticipating the Molting so they could loot all of it. Fortunately for them the looter, or looters, had been interested only in the small arms. Archard's willing muscle had transported the big guns to the firing line.

The fort, which Perry had designed, helped build, and overseen the construction of, had been where they'd lived after joining Archard. People still lived there, but it had also become a backup offensive in case the firing line was overrun. Archard had instituted a rotation of the Draw that now included Fort Perry. Frox, Perry, and their group would stay until the current one was complete, and then they would return to the firing line, and another group would move in to guard, be ready, or implement another Draw.

All of the Draws had taken place at the firing line so far, but the creatures kept getting through, and too many folks were getting killed while their backs were turned. Personally, Frox was looking forward to going back to the line. He'd rather be actively reducing their numbers than staring at one cell, waiting for a man to die or molt inside, essentially allowing a fellow man to die by his hand and an extension of Archard's rule. He had no idea if this Draw would work or not.

The rest of the armed men and women were farther down the wall. All stood at the top of the fort atop a platform that ran continuously aside from the rows of sharpened tree ends that jutted inward every ten meters or so. They were grouped together to defend openings for sectors of fire. They aimed their guns downward with such intensity it was as if they believed the man could somehow molt, destroy the metal surrounding him, and scramble up and get at them before they could pull triggers.

When what was supposed to be the inevitable happened, and a mass of them did finally appear, using the trees surrounding the fort to climb would be impossible because they'd been cut down a hundred feet in every direction. At least they had that going for them. Still nothing could distill the boredom, and with boredom came eventual complacency.

That was usually when Molters attacked, as if they somehow knew when human defenses were weakest, so Frox decided to walk the platform, reminding them all of that fact. It helped him stay warmer, the walking around, and also gave him a break from chatty Perry.

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CHAPTER 6

Steam rose all around him as Jonah lay in the tub. All of his sore spots, mostly his hands and feet, throbbed. Doreen had gotten his bath ready while he shoveled snow off the roof. Only in spring was shoveling not necessary all the time, but at such a high elevation, it seemed like it was always snowy. When they'd arrived, the roof had been heavy with powder but still intact. Whoever had built the cabin had planned on living there for a while. It wasn't just some retreat, which was reassuring.

Why were they in that cave?

It was frustrating that he could be so vigilant, yet Molters could practically be directly under his feet. Obviously it was possible for them to dig with those claws of theirs, but it wasn't the how. It was the why and the question of there being more caves. There was something about the place that wasn't normal for them, that was unusual compared to what he'd already encountered and beyond what Jonah and Sven had figured out in Henrytown. The mysteries of the Molters seemed endless, so he might as well enjoy his bath.

Even if the roof did collapse, Jonah would rebuild it, a taste of his lifelong fantasy of building a house. He possessed plenty of books that contained enough knowledge for him to cobble together a home, and it wasn't as if there wouldn't be a foundation left if there were any kind of damage. But repairing a roof was a project he needed to avoid. He didn't need any additional work to do, and it didn't take much effort to keep the cabin relatively free of snow. Even so, he was still amazed by the consistent amount of flurries.

As far as functionality, their living quarters were very basic. The cabin was a dry cabin, so there was no running water. They boiled snow or stream water to drink or drank bottled water. Whatever they prepared they stored in jugs, bottles, jars, or canteens. Below the bathtub and the sink next to it were pipes that ran south at an angle using plain old gravity, allowing water to drain into buckets, and those were accessible through the cellar.

The kitchen sink functioned the same way, with simple plumbing that also emptied into a jug and then drained into buckets for emptying wherever was best. There was even a soap dispenser made into the sink itself. Traces of their life could always attract what hunted them, so Jonah disposed any hint of them at least a few hundred feet away from the cabin, minimum. That was another of Jonah's jobs, of course. He wasn't about to let Doreen go traipsing around in the nearby woods.

Their current lifestyle harkened back to when Jonah had been in the war, when their living conditions were very similarly minimal. Basic personal hygiene—shaving, washing one's face, and brushing one's teeth—was accomplished with whatever treated water was available. Primitive methods were used for washing clothes as well, like scrubbing them in a basin and then

hanging them up to dry, but where Jonah and his compatriots had had the desert heat available to aid in drying clothing, he and his people now hung their clothes indoors. Having a bathtub was a luxury.

Many things had changed since the Molting, especially life for humans, but also the weather in subtle but noticeable ways. Jonah hadn't realized them until he'd spoken with Henry all those years ago when he'd first met him on the road. In order for the Molters to exist at all, the subtle variations in climate had no doubt taken place over the rest of the planet too.

Part of him didn't want to know everything about Molters. That way he could maintain some semblance of hope. That there was a place where they couldn't survive, which meant humans might be able to live there. Regardless of facts, it was interesting that the ferocity of the Molter threat could be counterbalanced by the weather. The bloodsuckers didn't care for the cold.

With everything that had changed in recent years, it was as if nature couldn't make up its mind. Jonah often wondered if it was the beginning of the next age of ice. If so, how would it affect humanity? He had hoped to find books on the subject already, but he hadn't located any so far. Then again a library had never been one of his main destinations.

The door to the tiny bathroom opened, dissipating his involuntary wonderings. "More hot?" Doreen said and closed the door behind her.

Glad to be brought back to reality and be in the moment, Jonah said, "Sure," from the tub.

Doreen walked the tea kettle, heated on the woodstove, toward him, and steam spritzed up from the spout. "Pull your feet back." He did, and after carefully aiming over where Jonah's feet had just been beneath the water, she poured.

"Feels good," he said.

"You sure needed a bath."

That was for sure. The warm water felt great. To go from filthy, chilled, and damp everywhere to warm and clean was like night and day. It was the second round of tub water for him. The first had been so muddy that he hadn't been able to even see himself under the surface.

"Do you want bubbles?"

Jonah laughed. It was so nice to hear her make a joke. She was in a good mood and happy to see him. She was glad he was home. Feeling their bond made his stomach as warm as if he'd drunk a shot of whiskey. "You know I do but no thanks. Save it for Heike."

"You sure?"

"Pretty sure."

As she poured the last drops of heated water, she gave him a brief smile and then left, quickly closing the door behind her to respect his privacy. He heard Heike ask if she could take a bath after him as the door shut, but she was told no because she'd already taken one earlier in the day. Maybe Doreen's depression was over? He hoped so, but if not, that was OK. Jonah

just wanted everyone to be healthy.

Jonah blew out all his air, which turned into a sigh of pleasure. The steaming heat of the warm water was very relaxing. It made him want to stay in the tub even longer and even though he was already clean. He'd never really been a bath taker before, but he was starting to enjoy them.

When he'd mentioned to Doreen that he wasn't very good at taking baths, she'd laughed. It was true, though. Jonah was never sure if it was best to be lying down or sitting up. When lying down, he made one wrong move and heard that underwater *humph* sound, lost his grip, and for a few seconds, floated like a detached buoy until he sat up, got his bearings, and then began the whole process over again.

The cabin didn't have a shower, how he'd always preferred to wash aside from swimming in the ocean, so taking baths had required some getting used to. He'd realized he was out of practice because he hadn't taken them since he was a kid. Regardless of how he got clean, the best part was getting warm.

"If society resumes, I'm taking showers."

"What did you say?" Doreen said, muffled.

Although there were walls, they were practically paper thin, so it was almost as if they were all in the same room. "Just talking to myself."

"That's what crazy people do."

"Don't I know it."

"Oh no!" Heike shrieked from somewhere. "Jonah's gone goofy!"

"*Heike*," Doreen said in her mom tone.

Even with all the bad going on in the world, he would still do his best to locate a solar shower—one of those plastic bags that needed to be filled with water, then warmed by the sun—and take a shower that way. Hopefully someday. Except that would mean needing to live where the sun broke through the cloud cover on occasion.

Unless I heated the water and poured it into the solar shower. That would work. I love loopholes.

The point of his fantasy was that Jonah could use some normal temperatures, some real heat, like a nice day on a California beach during a hot summer. He would love to relax on any beach again someday, enjoying it with Doreen and Heike, and maybe make their family even bigger with another little one or two.

Daydreams about sand and surf were common for him. He'd always had so much fun and made so many fond memories at beaches when he was younger. He wanted to make more. He wondered how many times Doreen wanted to get pregnant. Whatever that number was, he intended to do his part in repopulating the Earth.

Deciding the luxury was over, he stood up with a sloshy splash—careful so as not to fall and crack his head open, every bath taker's worst fear—and his body temperature instantly dropped about fifty degrees. Even though it was expected, he was always surprised by the difference between the sanctuary of

a hot bath and the regular air directly above it.

Outside the bathroom he could hear the familiar commotion of Heike busily deciding which game they were all going to play together. It was one of those nights when he pretended he thought it was a great idea, to make everyone happy. But really, he just wanted to sit on the couch and relax.

He grabbed the towel off the rack, dried off, and then got dressed with the clothes Doreen had meticulously folded and balanced on the sink. He suddenly felt a familiar daily urge and wished a real toilet was within sitting distance. That was another luxury he looked forward to experiencing again: being able to sit down and do his business inside the cozy warmth of indoors, as opposed to an outhouse.

When he stepped out of the bathroom, he said he needed to go out and do some paperwork, which made Heike giggle. She knew what it meant. Doreen said *Heike* in that parental tone again as Jonah put on his cold-weather boots near the door and lifted his jacket off the coat rack, always careful not to kick over the rocket launcher in the corner. Then he grabbed the shotgun—the semiautomatic one equipped with a silencer—and went outside.

He saw his breath immediately, and it almost hurt to breathe, as if he were inhaling a cigarette, the kind that tasted like mint, which his friend Eric had bought him as a joke in Oberstein—Jonah had never cared for the brand—before everything went bad. The world had gotten much darker, but he could still see well enough to make out some clouds.

As he made his way across the crunchy snow toward the frosty outhouse awaiting him, he remembered how warm he had been just minutes ago in the bath. It felt like a hundred-degree difference. It was probably close to that. Sure felt that way.

Shrieking wind suddenly pushed through the icy woods as if it were searching Jonah out, doing its best to knock him over with gusts before he could begin his late-night paperwork. The gusts were powerful enough to cause the eaves of the man-made structure behind him to whine in protest.

The outhouse was fairing no better, so he lowered the latch that held it closed and opened the door, inspecting the inside with weapon aimed. With nothing to fear, he closed the door behind him as quickly as he could, immediately smelling ancient waste. He set the shotgun against the wall and sat down. There was a latch on the inside of the door, too, to keep Molters out while such necessary business was being done.

Jonah remembered how they could open some doors all too well, and the last thing he wanted was to encounter one of them inside the outhouse hiding and waiting to attack him. He wouldn't put it past them to be capable of such a thing, so whenever the outhouse door was opened, a weapon was aimed beforehand, by Jonah when he went or by Doreen when she and Heike went together. It was one of the rules. The ladies silently hated using the outhouse.

An addition he would have liked to equip their outdoor restroom with was illumination. Jonah had collected quite a few lanterns, but they were a waste

of precious fuel, and they could give away their position at night, so they were used sparingly. He used to hang chem lights on the ceiling of the outhouse so they could see day or night.

A chem light was a reliable light source, easy to use by bending it in half to produce a glow, and he had collected as many as he could find from all of the military bases he'd cleared out, but after a while, he thought it was best to save them. They had been using them up too quickly, and now they were familiar enough with the interior of the outhouse. Cracking the door allowed some light in, even when it was dark, if he wanted.

What was he saving the chem lights for? Only Jonah's future self knew that. At least it was warmer inside the outhouse than outside it. Nothing could be as warm as being submerged into a hot bath indoors, though, nothing else he could think of. A womb perhaps?

Again his thoughts drifted to pregnancy, babies, reproduction. It happened so often since they'd lost their little one. He hoped it was normal to think of such things, to grieve, probably to figure them out, but it was also something far more powerful. There was quite a difference between choosing to have a child for the family to raise and love and desperately needing one for the human race to battle the enemy presently destroying it.

Every living human had a responsibility to do their part to help sustain the species. Jonah stifled a laugh after thinking about how serious he must look as he finished what was natural, in an outhouse in a freezing, snow-blanketed forest in the mountains with a shotgun within reach.

Just do your paperwork.

That shotgun in hand, he made his way back, giving the area a onceover as the wind rose up out of nowhere to battle him again, as if it had been in waiting. The blasts of air were so forceful he wanted to tell them to fuck off. Going number one or two gave him the opportunity to take in whatever was going on outside the cabin. To spot any trouble if there was any. Typically there wasn't, but doing so caused him to relax. At least enough to get some sleep for the night.

Unless he had one of those damn nightmares. He hoped his routine would work so well one day that he could sleep in as long as a depressed teenager, like he had when he was young. Past noon and not even have a care in the world. If only he could reprogram the part of him that was a natural early bird or that, as a soldier, hadn't gotten brainwashed to get up when he woke up to get shit done.

The cabin door was always locked after him when he went out, so he knocked the secret knock, and Doreen unlocked and then opened it. He placed the shotgun just inside the door next to the rocket launcher and coat rack, and then he and Doreen stepped back out and past the porch onto the snow. She carried a pot filled with lukewarm water and poured it over his hands as he rubbed them back and forth. He felt warmer almost immediately and watched as the trickles that sloshed over his hands streamed onto the snow, creating

clouds of steam.

"You don't always have to wash," Doreen said.

"I do after paperwork."

"You even do it after number one," she said, pouring the last drops. "You are clean."

Jonah shook his hands behind him so as not to get any drips on Doreen and then wiped them on his pants. "I know, but it's what we do." Steam rose up between them. "What we do keeps us civilized. Human." She gave him a look as if she didn't think it was important. "*Everything* we do matters."

"OK."

"It does. Do you see animals washing their hands after they do their business?"

She laughed. "Animals don't have hands. They have hooves."

It was Jonah's turn to laugh. "Not all of them. Some of them have paws . . . or whatever. Flippers? What do birds have?"

"You city man! Hmm. Actually I'm not sure either."

"Ha!"

"We'll ask Heike when we get inside," Doreen said. "The only animals I've seen lately are rabbits."

"Now they have paws."

"Definitely."

What they feared was also an animal, technically, but a more apt description of them would be a monster. Jonah hated that they crossed his mind so often. Probably because it was possible for them to always be near, and that brought up what he said next. "Speaking of rabbits . . . I'd like to take her hunting soon. She's ready."

"What makes you say that?"

If she can kill a rabbit, she can kill a Molter. "Because she needs to be."

"She's already practiced shooting a few times. She's still very young."

"Not in today's world." Before the last statement veered the conversation off course into a separate debate, or worse, an argument, he said, "I was young when my dad taught me to shoot. She needs to be comfortable with a weapon."

"How old were you again?"

"Six. Younger than Heike."

Doreen stared at him. Uncertainty all over her face. "I would think that would be scary for a youngster."

"I remember it as being fun. And I trusted my dad."

"You shot animals?"

"No. Targets."

"What kind of targets?"

"Things that didn't move. Cans and fruit mostly."

"Fruit?"

"Yeah, when you shot them, they'd explode." Jonah briefly saw the look

Doreen occasionally gave him when she saw a boy instead of a man. He wasn't speaking her language. Most women weren't too crazy about explosions. None he'd ever met anyway. Even Doreen, who'd served in the German military. "Well, it depended on the size of the fruit."

"You wasted food."

It wasn't a question. "Yes," he said, "but that was then. Not now. There's no way I'd do that now."

"How old were you when you were taught to hunt?"

Jonah cleared his throat. "Twelve."

"See? That's far older than Heike is now. Maybe she can still just shoot here? There's plenty of trees or . . ."

"Can't waste any more ammo."

"We have plenty."

Jonah shook his head even though she was right. They did have plenty of ammunition, but he'd already taught Heike the basics of how to fire a weapon, so more target practice would just be more of the same and a waste of time. "You have to be comfortable with killing to hunt. It's something she needs to know how to do."

Doreen looked at him for a long time, and he knew she was thinking about saying something about how her daughter wasn't a killer, but those objections were difficult to support under the present threat. Everyone needed to be ready to do whatever had to be done because of what didn't need to be mentioned; when this kind of danger arose, it was often kill or be killed.

They were standing close, and she was holding the empty pot at her side as if she was debating whether to clobber him over the head with it, so he leaned in and kissed her. Her mouth didn't soften much, and she turned away from his affection far sooner than he would have liked.

"We'll talk more about it later. It's cold out here," she said and went inside, leaving the door cracked.

Jonah exhaled a cone of foggy breath. His understanding of her lately was only projection. Doreen was going through a lot more than he knew. She was still hurting obviously and doing her best to hide it. He had no doubt she loved him, but he wanted to fix her and their relationship completely so that there were no noticeable cracks, make it how it was before. But what could he do that he wasn't doing already?

Only time could mend what had happened, and time was never in a hurry unless you didn't want it to be. Time was on its own schedule. Even though Jonah understood that, it didn't prevent him from feeling impatient. After stomping his feet, knocking off enough snow so as not to get hollered at, he went inside.

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CHAPTER 7

Jonah closed the door behind him and locked it. Doreen was on the couch, knitting, and Heike stood atop a stepladder, her tongue stuck out of the side of her mouth as she concentrated on placing an ornament just beyond her reach. Doreen had mentioned that Heike's real father had stuck his tongue out while immersed in projects too.

"Heike, what are bird feet called?" Jonah said.

"Talons," she said without hesitation.

"What about duck feet?"

"Um . . . webbed? Webbed feet."

"That sounds right. Thanks." Jonah and Doreen nodded to each other. "Your mom and I were trying to figure it out."

"You're welcome," Heike said without taking her focus off the tree. "Whenever you want to know something, just ask me."

The adults chuckled. Seemed a game was not on the agenda yet. Jonah had hoped Heike had a solitary one already underway so he might not have to partake. He liked playing games but not all the time, even though concentrating on something fun with those he loved was the best way to forget about all of what was going on outside, far beyond the walls of the cabin.

The holiday bells Jonah had used as a survival tactic years ago were being used appropriately, for the holiday they were meant for. Jonah had dragged the six footer inside days ago, and with it a million pine needles had scattered everywhere on the floor and somehow the couch. He'd even reached under his shirt the other night and pulled out a few while he slept.

The tree had some slight differences in its decoration since he'd inspected it last, although he couldn't quite remember how it had been. Regardless, Heike had obviously decided to redecorate, moving the ornaments around the branches to appease her aesthetic. Seemed her arrangement from the previous night did not suit her. Her roommates were just fine with that. Gave her something to do that she enjoyed. They all enjoyed it, really, especially because they had music for the very holiday they were celebrating to go along with it, even though the actual day was still weeks away. There were presents under the tree already.

Presents around the holidays were mostly finds of value. Jonah had made it clear that he put any type of ammo or weapons on his figurative list. Tape was somewhat of a rarity, so if there were presents under the tree, they were often cleverly folded and then placed within the wrapping. Everyone knew to be careful when they picked up a present. Mostly they were unfolded as opposed to torn open. That way the wrapping paper could be saved in a marked bin for the next holiday or birthday.

Since Jonah had already obtained so many weapons and often went out to search for more, new weapons were more of a collection rather than necessity. He had so many that he had extra, and last year he had given Doreen a snub-nose revolver. Something she could access quickly if she needed for her own protection. While he was away. She had given him an antique grenade launcher in return. The idea that the weapons were wrapped just like any other present and placed under the tree was quite funny, in a way, but these were strange times.

Weapons had a beauty to them that Jonah could appreciate, especially guns from different eras, and he admired the craftsmen responsible for each design. Some from previous wars had gotten it right to begin with, and if he got backed into a corner, he would prefer one of them—like a .45-caliber pistol for instance—over most from the modern era.

"The tree looks nice," Jonah said.

Heike's head whipped toward him, rocking the ladder slightly. "You think so?"

"Careful," Doreen said. "Don't fall. You'll topple the tree over, and then all of the ornaments will fall off too."

Heike frowned. "Not all of them."

"You should be closer. Safer that way."

"I don't like the needles on my arms. It feels too gritchy."

"*Gritchy* isn't a word."

"It sounds like a word."

"You can't make up words."

"You knew what I meant, though, right?"

"I suppose."

Placing a hand on the wall, Heike carefully stood on her tiptoes and eased the ornament securely onto the branch. Then she descended to the last step on the ladder, exclaimed "Oh no," then slowly took another careful step to the floor before performing a perfect flop onto the couch next to Doreen. She breathed in and out quickly, as if it were actually possible for an eight-year-old to be out of breath, and lay down, resting her head on her mom's lap.

Doreen set her knitting aside and ran her fingers through Heike's hair. "Such a silly girl."

Heike scrambled out of her mom's grasp and stood up next to the couch, swaying. "Dance party?"

Jonah and Doreen looked at each other, smiled—Jonah with reluctance—and then Doreen stood up. They both started dancing too.

"Yay!" Heike said and started wiggling faster. "I can't dance fast to this music."

Doreen swayed to the holiday song. "You want to dance fast? Is that it?"

She wiggled even more. "I do!"

"You're going to tire yourself out!"

Hopefully, Jonah thought. Doreen laughed, a real laugh, and it made him

feel warm inside. *No troubles for now. This is beautiful. Well, not what I'm doing.*

Heike looked over at him. "You stopped dancing! Against the rules!"

Jonah realized he had and that he must look silly standing still with all of the dancing going on around him. "Sorry," he said and proceeded to resume the dance moves that almost every man his age was capable of: raising his arms at a ninety-degree angle, moving his shoulders and hips in opposite directions, and making a face of concentration with lips clenched as if he'd just tasted something bitter.

Heike raised her hands in the air. "Like this!"

Jonah raised his hands up as she did. "OK."

"You aren't a very good dancer."

Jonah was undeterred. "You always say that."

"Just because you can wiggle doesn't mean you can dance."

"Words of wisdom," he said to Doreen.

A large smile spread over Doreen's beautiful face. "Wiggling is all *you're* doing," she said to the eight-year-old dance instructor.

"Yes," Heike said, "but I look good doing it!"

Their laughter was contagious, and it even lasted after the holiday song they'd been dancing to ended and the next one, one of the classics about the quiet of night, began. The touching song sent them all to the couch together. Maybe it was because of the lyrics but they stared in silence at the tree, mesmerized by all its twinkling, falsely created by the burning fire that shone through the transparent, tempered glass of the woodstove.

Doreen wasn't close enough for Jonah to hold her hand with Heike in the middle of them, so he reached an arm over Heike and put a hand on Doreen's shoulder. Doreen didn't budge, which made him feel good, so he gave her shoulder a little squeeze.

"Is it game time?" Heike said. "Who wants to play?"

"Go ask the neighbors," Jonah said down at her.

"Ha!" Heike leaned into him. "We don't *have* neighbors."

"You sure?"

"Yeah. If we did, and they had kids my age, would I be allowed to go play with them?" she said to her mom.

"It would depend."

"On what?"

When Doreen shot a glance at Jonah, he cringed and mouthed, "Sorry."

"I'm not sure," Doreen said. "We can discuss it later."

"Why later?" Heike said.

"Because. Now, which game would you like to play?"

Heike looked around. "Um . . ."

Doreen stood and walked over to the bookshelf that was full of all kinds of reading materials but also board games Jonah had discovered and claimed for them during his searches, ready to grab whichever one interested Heike the

most.

"Not one of those, not tonight. I've grown bored of them," Heike said, suddenly sounding ten years older.

"*Heike*. Jonah worked very hard to find these."

Her eyes got wide, and she turned to him. "I'm so sorry, Jonah. I know that. I like them. It's just . . ."

"I know you do, sweetie," Jonah said.

Doreen made her way back to the couch. "If not any of them, then what game would you like to play?"

Heike fidgeted. "I've been thinking about it for a while . . ."

"OK. And?"

"Um, can we play a . . . a *talking* game?"

"What do you mean?" Doreen said. "Like a word game?"

"No. We could uh . . . talk about stuff."

"Like what?"

"Like . . . what we miss."

"What we miss," Doreen said rhetorically. "Do you mean what we used to have but don't right now?"

"Yes."

Jonah already didn't want to play the game for too many reasons to count, all of which made him uneasy, but he hid that well by using the mask every adult could put on when required. He knew people better than they knew themselves sometimes—somehow—and he understood that reminiscing about the past might seem like a good idea at first, but by the end of the conversations, everyone would only realize just how much better everything used to be. They'd also be reminded about everyone they'd lost.

Bringing up a memory would inevitably include someone who was dead or missing or worse, and Jonah already had too many of those memories. And daily. Whatever it was, it would not turn out to be a game, and it was also the last thing they needed right now because of everything that had gone on since the Molting.

But especially because Doreen had lost the baby. It didn't matter if it had been over a year ago. The pain for both of them, all three of them, was too raw. Jonah wished he had found some new games while out last to distract Heike, but then again she had said she had been thinking about a talking game for a while.

"Who should begin?" Doreen said.

"You, Mom."

"OK . . . I miss . . . I miss . . . ooh, *waffles*."

"Ooh, that's a good one. I like waffles too. I miss those too. You go, Jonah."

"Nah. Go ahead."

"Please."

"Really? It was your idea."

"No thank you. I want to be polite."

"That's nice of you," he said. "All right . . . I miss pancakes."

"That's cheating."

"Why?"

"Too similar to what Mom said."

"You only just invented the game. How am I supposed to know the rules?"

Heike shrugged and then got busy doing his thinking for him. "Don't you miss where you're from? Where are you from again?"

Jonah grinned. "America."

"I *know* that. What state? I forget. Starts with a *C*."

His stomach dropped as he thought of the faces of his friends. The ones who'd died. "California."

"California," she said. "I was going to guess Colorado. Is all of America like California?"

"Um . . . no. Not at all."

"So it's like Europe? How each country is different?"

"Not that different but each state has its own culture. Partly because of the weather, I think. For instance, I hear it's always raining in Seattle, but where I'm from, it's always sunny. At least when I left."

"Where is Seattle? Near California?"

"Yes."

"You've been to Seattle?"

"Yes."

"Was it raining?"

"Yeah, it was."

"Do you miss living in California?"

"I do."

That was true. Jonah did miss home, missed being in the United States period, and often, but thankfully Heike had practically answered for him because that wasn't what he was thinking about missing according to her game. He was missing Sharon, Gil, Eric, Daisy, and Danielle. Doreen and Heike hadn't known them, so he wouldn't bring them up. That way he wouldn't have to explain what had happened. He didn't want to even think of them right now.

They were dead, and the dead were in no hurry to be remembered. It wasn't up to them. It was selfish of Jonah, he knew that, but remembering them was still very, very painful. Nothing could bring them back, and losing them still hurt too much. Probably because of how they died, how their deaths were his fault, had resulted from mistakes he made.

Aside from the friends, or even those he'd known briefly, he'd lost, he had no idea of the whereabouts of his parents, brother, sisters, his nieces and nephews or if they were even still alive. He had been so content just a few minutes ago during—one of their many—dance parties because just for a little while he wasn't thinking about everyone who'd been lost.

"California. Home," Heike said. "That's a good one."

"What do you miss about California?" Doreen said to him.

Come on, woman. Really? I thought you knew me better than that. "I thought Heike was in charge?"

Doreen made a playfully disgusted sound, and Heike said, "What do you miss about California?" Then she giggled.

Jonah interlocked his hands behind his head. There was no way out of it, so he might as well play. Get it over with. How bad could it be? "Well, and this is something I think about a lot. The beach. The escapism of it. You get off work or *don't go to work*."

They both smiled at him, and Heike said, "Where did you work?"

"I had all kinds of jobs but nothing I was passionate about after the army."

"Let him finish his original thought," Doreen said, and Heike nodded for him to continue.

"The sound of the waves. You can always count on them. They never stop. Like a slow heartbeat. They're just so . . . relaxing, and even if you worked that day and you go there, it feels like you're on vacation. I love how the sun feels and how it practically forces you to drink a beer. Beer tastes better in the summer."

And whiskey tastes good whenever. But you can't handle it anymore.

"Just one beer, huh?" Doreen said.

Jonah wished he was the type of man who could have only one beer or one drink, but he wasn't. He'd quit drinking years ago. Since then he'd slipped up only that once. Still, this was a game, and games were supposed to be fun. And they didn't have to be completely realistic. "Well, maybe a six-pack . . . *or two*."

Heike's face scrunched up. "Why would you drink *beer*?"

"Because it's delicious."

"It's gross."

"That's because you're eight. Tell me that when you're twenty-eight."

"I'll be a wino by then," Heike said with confidence, raising her eyebrows.

Both Jonah and Doreen laughed, and Doreen said, "That doesn't mean what you think it means."

"It doesn't?"

"No, 'wino' means alcoholic. And hobo, I think."

"Hobo? Oh no! I don't want to be that. I won't be that. I just meant I would drink wine—"

"You're too young to think about drinking anything but water," Doreen said, smiling.

"Jonah lets me sip his coffee sometimes."

Doreen raised her eyebrows the same way her daughter just had but at Jonah. Then she said to Heike, "Coffee will stunt your growth."

A confident smirk spread across Heike's face. "He said you would say that so not to tell you."

"Hey," Jonah whispered, "that was supposed to be a secret."

Heike smiled even more mischievously. "He also said that that's an old tale that isn't true because of how tall he is."

Doreen's eyes flicked accusingly at Jonah.

"Doreen . . . she likes it. Just a few sips sometimes. That's it. Right?"

"Right," Heike said.

"I liked coffee when I was a kid."

"And you *love* it now," Doreen said.

"I sure do."

"I sure do too!" Heike agreed.

"You're too young for . . ." Doreen reached over and gently tugged at Jonah's beard. "Tell us more about what you were saying before."

"About beer?"

"No, funny man. The beach."

"I know, just teasing." Jonah inhaled and exhaled, thinking it would be easier to hold two hundred pounds over his head right now instead of keeping his happy mask on. He was doing a good job of acting, but it felt like it was beginning to slip off. "All the people doing different things. Some are playing games—"

"What kind of games?" Heike said.

"You're interrupting," Doreen said to her.

"It's OK," Jonah said. "Let's see, volleyball, or football, people are flying kites, throwing Frisbees, drinking beer—"

Heike's face scrunched up. "Drinking beer isn't a game!"

"Tell that to the dudes I grew up with."

"Ha!"

"*And* as I was saying, there's almost always surfers."

"Do you know how to surf?" Heike said.

"I do. I'm not that good at it, but I'm all right. Good enough to enjoy it, I guess. I mostly liked just being out among others. Everybody looks like they're having a good time. It makes you feel alive and forget about all your problems. Makes you feel like everything's OK."

Everything he was telling them was so they could escape into his story. He realized he was doing it for them, but even though he knew that, he sure didn't feel OK. Remembering all that stuff made him miserable for some reason, and his heart was racing. Probably because part of him suspected he'd never see a beach again. Wouldn't ever enjoy it the way he was talking about or even remembered. It was almost like he was talking about someone as if they were alive when they were really dead. Plus Molters were drawn to warmer climates.

"That's a good one about the beach," Heike said. "I like it. Will you take us there someday? Or not."

The mask he put on when needed was dissolving, but he couldn't stop it, and Jonah also couldn't prevent his true feelings from beginning to show

through bit by bit, edging through no matter how hard he tried to prevent it. Heike was only trying to make him feel better, but even she could see it, he suspected. Even when females were young, they knew how to be compassionate, so she was pretending she hadn't.

But maybe that was all in his head. Now and then he got confused about intent and also everything else. "Sure I will," he said anyway.

"What do you miss, Heike?" Doreen said.

"I miss . . . Grandpa . . . *Opa*."

Shit. I fucking knew it.

For a while the only sound was the CD playing at a low volume, low enough so as not to be heard outside and draw in killers with teeth and claws, and also the occasional snap of timber in the stove as it burned up and broke down into ashy nothingness. They all missed Henry, and Jonah often wondered if he was actually still alive, how that could even be remotely possible after all this time with all the dangers that had surely gotten in his way, and if he'd ever actually show up here. It seemed impossible.

This wasn't a game. It was therapy, and sometimes it was necessary to open up, even if it was inconvenient, or not the right time, or if Jonah was being weak. He felt like he had to say something right now, so he did.

"I miss Henrytown," Jonah said, "and everyone who died there. I wish . . ."

He wanted to finish that sentence, to continue and tell them how he really felt, but he didn't dare, realizing it would be a mistake. He didn't want to remind them of their losses, but it had slipped out.

Instead of saying anything else, he quickly darted to the bedroom, holding back tears as he realized he'd said too much; threw on his clothes that were ready for morning, which also included a jacket; and grabbed his silenced pistol off the dresser.

When Jonah walked out, Doreen and Heike both looked very confused. "Going for a run," he said, putting his boots on.

"But it's night," Doreen said. "And the game."

"Don't you like my game?" Heike said.

Jonah swallowed back his emotion, and instead of answering her question, he said, "We're going to be OK. Lock the door."

Then he went outside as fast as possible, welcoming the chilliness that fit his decisions and indecisions, accidentally slamming the door behind him. Jonah heard the door lock as he headed out into the cold winter night.

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CHAPTER 8

"Son of a . . ."

That was not what he planned at all. At all. Everything had been going so well, and how he'd reacted was so far away from his intent. Why did he have to do such things?

Regular people had no idea how easily emotions activated an ex-soldier in unpredictable ways. They were like invisible land mines that caused other emotions to explode, except it was unknown even to them when it would happen. Even Jonah wasn't sure why he overreacted sometimes, especially during something as innocent as a simple game. All he knew was his heart was still racing for reasons he didn't understand, and so were his thoughts, and it made him feel like a weakling.

Some vulnerability was inevitable at some point, he supposed. They had no idea that his thoughts, remembering suffering and the specifics of what had occurred during his past, often ate him alive inside. He knew it was because on a certain level he blamed himself. For all of it. Most of the time, it was controllable, compartmentalized, but trauma never completely disappeared. It was simply dormant, buried, and under the right—or wrong—stress, it could be triggered and brought forth, boiling to the surface. He had wanted to pretend everything was fine and do his best to be a normal person, not freak out during a game that a little girl made up.

What the hell is wrong with me?

He wasn't that exposed very often, and it hadn't happened for a long time. Most of the time, Jonah was able to hide how he truly felt, but he knew not to ignore it. The reality was that what had happened had happened, whether he'd meant for it to or not. He definitely needed to clear his head, and one of the best ways was to go for a run.

Yeah, run away.

His breath quickened, and he switched the pistol from his right to his left hand.

That's not what you're doing.

Even though his version of a run was actually a jogger's pace, he still liked to think of it as a run. Sometimes he was going fast enough to believe it was such, and there was something about pushing himself, facing whatever it was that was making him feel out of control, that would benefit whoever he decided to be tomorrow. Or later tonight. When he had to face them again.

For some reason he found the best way to better himself, to figure things out in a controlled manner, was through exercising or working. Right now jogging in the snow with the temperature below freezing was more bearable than talking about how he felt. It was frigid out, and he was cold, but he wouldn't stay that way for long. Not if he kept up his current pace. Hopefully

he'd find some Molters to kill.

The path was the same every day—he didn't run on Sundays—and the only way he mixed it up was when he jogged the circular path in the opposite direction. He knew it by heart and already felt himself warming as each second ticked by. Jogging in the snow was good exercise as long as he didn't step in a hole and sprain his ankle, which he'd done before. He could only go so fast while there was snow on the ground, but he knew where most of the bigger holes were located now. Unless those underground varmints had dug new ones. They were easy kills for Molters, so that wasn't likely.

Because he jogged every day but Sunday, he hardly ever breathed hard. He was in the best shape he had ever been. Thankfully, he could still see well enough not to get lost. The dark sky was covered with clusters of stars.

Typically, he did his best not to show emotion and was able to hide it when he needed to do things like this, just casually mention to Doreen where he was going and then work things out in his head on a run or on a mission. On his own. It was better for women when they weren't burdened by a man's worries. Most of which could be worked out with a few hours of thinking. When he returned, he would be normal again or at least normal enough to seem that way. They'd never mentioned being concerned about him before.

Except this time he'd left during the middle of a damned kid's game! That was something he'd never done before. Almost every man instinctively knew that if he burst into tears for no reason—what seemed like no reason—it could be very difficult for women to handle, and had he not left, he might have done just that. He wasn't sure why he felt that way, but that was why he was out. Anyone who saw a man show emotion might or might not accept it. It depended on where they were in their lives, but in today's world, tears were a weakness, and men needed to remain strong.

Anything less made them all vulnerable, and for many women, seeing their man break down registered in some deep, primal part of their brains as something close to absolute horror. Today's threats required the strength of primitive survival behavior for both sexes to survive. A man perceived as weak was hardly a man at all.

Even if that wasn't entirely true, it was a guideline Jonah would live by. He knew he was strong, but he also needed to be realistic, and right now he needed to deal with the stress of their predicament the way he knew to do it best: exercising and thinking by himself.

He suddenly imagined the cabin surrounded by the very Molters he wished would show so he could kill, his ladies afraid and the scary kind of vulnerable, and all because he left. He shouldn't have gone out so impulsively.

"*Not real*," Jonah puffed.

That wasn't actually happening. It was just his worst fears blossoming into images in his mind, compounded by his mood. He picked up the pace anyway. He didn't turn around. He would complete the one-mile lap, but he intended on turning the jog into a run no matter how deep the snow was so he could

finish faster than he typically did and return to them. Make sure they were safe at the safest place on Earth—the cabin. The safest place he was aware of.

Thoughts of possible relocation spots always peppered his mind, though. Head to another town, stay in the country, leave it, go to a city, go to America. While on his own, and for a long time, he'd considered returning to America —somehow—to attempt to track down his immediate family, his mom and dad and brother and sisters. But that had been before Doreen and Heike. His life had changed so much since meeting them.

Besides, attempting to find his immediate family wouldn't raise them from the dead if they were gone. If they were alive, he would find them again someday. But the specifics of the how and the when, along with the fact that they couldn't stay at the cabin forever, would be considerations for the future. Eventually he would find another place, somewhere safer to live, and permanent, but he didn't know where that would be.

It was then that he felt the change in him. Somehow, thinking about other things, things other than his usual self-loathing, made him feel better. Sometimes a man just needed a few minutes to himself to pick himself back up again. For Jonah it was a side mission wrapped in exercise. Nothing wrong with that.

But within those selfish minutes, something unpredictable—or worse, predictable, if what he feared was out there and close—could happen. Jonah ran even faster, his boots stomping into the snow so deeply it was as if he were overweight. He even heard himself breathing hard, as if he were actually out of shape, but that was because his pace was faster than a jog or even a run. Now it was a sprint.

When he stepped onto the porch, he heard the door unlock, and he took off his jacket. He was drenched in sweat. That was rare, especially for the time of year, and he was still breathing heavily—so invigorating—and steam poured off him as thickly as smoke from a fire. A run was just what he'd needed. Exercise technically belonged in the category of torture because it was often painful, but afterward he always felt better.

A natural health injection for the mind and body, he thought. He was also probably feeling as good as he did as a result of his pace. That was another thing about exercise; sooner or later the body got used to the regimen, so going so fast had shocked his system. He felt great. He was so glad to be back. He stomped his feet, accidentally dislodging fresh snow from the roof to fall in clumps onto the fresh powder below. That furrowed his brow, and he decided to take his boots off outside.

He opened the door and stepped inside with wet socks on. He hoped he wouldn't see the same worried, confused, and frightened faces as when he left. Or he thought he'd seen. He did feel a lot better. The anxieties from

before were gone, burned away, and destroyed by a necessary part of his routine, even though he hardly went out during the danger of night.

"How was the run?" Doreen said.

I love you so much, he thought. *Thank you.* He held the pistol in one hand and the wet jacket in the other like a trophy. "I feel like a new man."

"Good." She rose from the couch and took his jacket from him. "You're sweaty!"

"I am."

"You want another bath? I can heat some water."

"No thanks. I'll just towel off if I need to."

With a smile, she kissed him. Then she allowed him to kiss her back. One of the longest they'd shared in days. However Doreen was feeling, she knew when to put her own feelings aside, just as Jonah did, and be there for him, just as he was for her. It was an understanding between men and women who knew each other well enough, and not all understandings needed discussion.

Many *understandings* did require discussion, however, especially assumptions, so a lack of communication could cause much of the stress in a relationship and lead to unrealistic expectations or even unreal imaginings. That was probably why Jonah had been so worried about Doreen's well-being and their relationship lately. Much of it was probably only in his head. He wasn't sure, so just as he'd learned, he would talk to her about things more. Not just assume.

As far as tonight went, because of the love between them, how much they'd gone through together, and how much they meant to each other, nothing could get in the way of protecting the other's feelings when they were down. Unrealistic or real, sensing the temperature of each other's emotional wellness was the spine of their relationship.

Jonah finished the kiss and gave her another quick peck on the lips and then even a longer one on the cheek. If his actions had been discussed while he was away, it was a conversation of understanding because Heike hardly reacted to his return at all. It was as if he had only gone to the outhouse. She was on the floor in front of the tree, reading the instructions from one of the many board games Jonah couldn't remember finding for her.

Jonah stared at Doreen for a while, and as he did, some of his anxiety returned, his wanting to be strong for her, but her eyes were so soothing, so understanding, those feelings vanished as if he had gone on another run.

Still, he wanted to tell her, begin the discussion about what he thought about often: that they would leave one day but only under ideal circumstances. If ideal were even possible. Hopefully but not likely.

Except he didn't. Now wasn't the time for such a talk. He didn't know what the future held, but he would do his best to control it. Make it work for them. Protect them and only act when it was best.

When Heike rose with the instructions in her hand and headed for the couch, Jonah cautiously pointed the pistol at the ground—he would put it

back in the bedroom soon—and met her halfway, giving her a hug.

"*Eek!* You're freezing!"

"That's so strange because I feel hot."

"You're going to give me hypothermia!"

"You can't *give* someone hypothermia."

Heike squirmed out of his grasp. "Can too! I have a present for you."

"A present?"

Heike spun dramatically toward Doreen. "Can I give it to him now, Mom? I know it's early."

"Go ahead."

She spun back. "It will make you feel better. Presents make me feel better, and I should know because you always give them to me!"

"*Heike*?" Doreen warned.

Of course Jonah had been discussed while he was out, but he gave no hint of feeling gut kicked. "What is it?"

"I'm not going to *tell* you. Close your eyes."

"Wait a second," he said.

Jonah went to the bedroom and placed the pistol on the dresser. When he returned, he did as he was told, clamping his eyes shut. He heard crinkling paper, guessing Doreen had just handed Heike whatever Heike was about to hand over to him.

"OK, open them," Heike said.

When Jonah opened his eyes, Heike had her hands behind her back. "I don't see anything. You're trying to trick me."

She giggled. "Pick a hand."

Pinching his bearded chin thoughtfully, he pointed at her left arm.

"Nope!" she squealed.

Rubbing his mustache and grinning, he said, "Hmm," really giving it some thought, until Heike stomped her foot with impatience. Then he pointed at her right arm. She laughed and thrust a box wrapped in traditional holiday paper with pictures of trees and bells on it at him. She'd even used tape.

Sitting down, Heike followed him to the floor with a permanent smile plastered on her face, and Jonah vigorously, but carefully, picked at the wrapping.

"It was my idea," she said.

Underneath the wrapping was a shoebox, and under the lid were a notepad, pen, and what looked to be a very old pocket watch. Jonah did his best to conceal his puzzlement. He already had a watch and who knew how many pads of paper and pens. "All of this is *very nice*."

"He doesn't get it, Mom."

"Tell him."

"OK," she said with excitement. "When you clear, when you kill the monsters with your guns from a distance, you can use the watch by choosing where you aim at noon, writing down a landmark or something, and then you

write down the locations of the cocoons according to time. Ten o'clock, two o'clock, three o'clock. Like that. That way you won't have to dig for the tentpoles after it snows."

"*Oh*." He looked over at her proud mom. "Wow," he said to her. Then he smiled down at Heike. "That's great. That's a really good idea." *Damned good.* "You thought of that?"

She nodded. "Yes. Do you like it?"

"I love it."

"Good idea?"

"Better than good. Excellent."

"You're going to do it that way from now on?"

"I sure will."

She wiped at her brow. "*Phew*. I was so nervous."

Doreen was grinning. "She planned it for a month."

"Month and a half," Heike said.

"You never have to worry about what you give," Jonah said. "It's always about intent. And I can really use this." He leaned in and gave her another hug. "Thank you, sweetie."

"You're welcome," Heike said, pushing against him. "But you're still freezing!"

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CHAPTER 9

When Jonah woke up, he sensed he'd had a dream about being abandoned, forgotten about, which troubled him, so he immediately felt for Doreen, but there was space between them. It was interesting how, once you were awake, a dream could affect your thoughts as if it had actually happened. At least until the mind cleared. She have must been on the far side of their full-size bed.

Then again there was only so much room. Sometimes Doreen climbed in bed with Heike when she was having bad dreams, but that happened less and less, and Doreen only seldom did that, not wanting to disturb her sleep at all if she could help it. Jonah seemed to be the only one who had persistent nightmares.

He tried to remember if he'd done or said anything to irritate her before bedtime, making it so she wouldn't want to be lying alongside him, but he couldn't think of anything. From what he could recall, they'd all gone to bed contently. Maybe his behavior when he went out for his necessary run had upset her when she thought about it later. She'd seemed OK once he'd gotten back.

He reached farther but felt only empty, warmish sheets. Was she at the outhouse? She knew not to do that. Not go by herself. He'd only joked about using bedpans.

"Doreen?" he whispered.

No response, so he threw off the covers. Heike was sound asleep in her bed. There were only two bedrooms in the cabin, both only large enough for a bed and some furniture. Heike had chosen to forgo furniture and was surrounded with toys and other treasures—games—that kids enjoyed instead. Jonah had stumbled across so much during his searches that he'd left most of it behind, but he always took what he thought was best or what he suspected Heike would be interested in the most.

Doreen wasn't supposed to go outside by herself at night. It was agreed upon. Jonah went with her at night so they didn't have to wake Heike. If Heike needed to go to the bathroom at night, then she would take her mother with her, and Doreen would be armed. Doreen had been a new mom once, so she was used to getting up at all hours of the night. It was something mothers were ready to do even when their children were grown. Heike had once asked why Jonah got to go to the outhouse by himself, and Doreen had told her it was because he was the man of the house. Maybe not in charge, as he and Doreen shared that role, but definitely the man.

Glancing at the only door leading outside—there was no back door—he expected to see her come back inside, but then he noticed she was sitting on the couch and staring at the tree. That was a relief. Something was up, though.

Surely she had seen him standing there, and heard him, but she'd said nothing.

He waited until impatience got the better of him. "Coming back to bed?" he whispered.

"Soon," she whispered back.

Jonah knew what it felt like to be unaccompanied, and he was always prepared to be, but he hated the idea of being that way now. It was because of that stupid dream, but also he usually felt that way shortly after one of his . . . he didn't really know what to call them, but emotional episodes would be somewhat apt. They didn't happen very often, maybe only a handful of times a year. Then the love and care from his woman filled him up, and he felt strong again. He could just imagine explaining all that to his old friend, Eric, who'd died at the base in Oberstein. If he were still alive, Eric would definitely call Jonah a pussy.

As Jonah got older, those episodes got rarer, but when they came about, he knew to tend to them. It was almost like getting over the flu. He was aware that he'd experienced things during the war that had changed him, as many soldiers—those who'd survived, anyway—had, but he wasn't crazy about examining them under a microscope. Least of all by talking about it. Especially with Doreen, dumping it on her. It wasn't as if he had many neighbors to choose from, either, and definitely none who were professional human behavior specialists. There were only animals, so he'd rather direct all that junk into missions. Use it as fuel.

All that aside, he simply preferred to be with his woman as much as possible—unless he was in mission mode—but especially at night. He thought it was natural instinct. Most men probably wanted to be close to their women during the night, to protect them, because in the past it was when they were the most vulnerable.

He stood there, intending to go back to bed and trying to anticipate when she would join him, but she obviously had something on her mind. "OK if I sit with you?"

"You don't have to ask," she said sternly.

Jonah was reminded, just as he felt occasionally, that Doreen enjoyed being independent. Nothing wrong with that and he wanted to respect her individuality, but he was almost to her when he'd realized that, and he selfishly needed to be reassured about the unfamiliar feelings somewhere deep inside him where he was weak. Maybe it was normal. Pathetic really but he would go through a hundred deployments—while being aware of the irony of being away—if it meant she wouldn't leave him.

He sat down next to her, staring at the tree also, suddenly sensing the familiar warmth he felt whenever he was near her. He never told her how much he needed her, how he loved her so much he felt like he would die without her. There were other ways to communicate that, so he disguised all of it with affection while he held her hand, kissed her, hugged her, and made love to her. But especially by listening.

“I like the lights,” Doreen said. “I mean, the decorations.”

There was no electricity, but the decorations twinkled as if they were actually electrified like regular ones. It was only an illusion, tiny mirrors that reflected the fire still burning hot in the stove. Doreen must have put another log inside. It snapped and sizzled and raged, determined to heat up the surroundings.

For a while Jonah had considered tracking down solar panels, but they didn’t really need power, and he was sure it was difficult to charge them when it was overcast, stormy, and snowy for most of the year. Plus it would mean frequently clearing flurries from the panels. Maybe solar energy could be of use in the future after they relocated, but it wasn’t necessary for them here. Plus there was no shortage of wood surrounding them. He didn’t even have to cut down trees. They fell on their own. All he had to do was chop the logs into manageable pieces.

“It’s all right if you want to be alone—”

“I never feel that way.”

“This is a small place.” Whether she felt that way or not, being independent was a good thing. How long was only personal preference. “I do.”

“Well, that’s you. And it’s OK. I’m OK with that. It’s why we’re so good together. We are unalike in some ways. I like that for some reason.”

“We think alike for the important stuff.”

“We haven’t been through all of that yet. I’m not as confident as you.”

What does that mean? He thought it but didn’t say it. “I’m confident in us.”

“I am also, but it’s important to be prepared for the unexpected.”

“I agree. See? I know what you mean. You don’t even have to explain anymore.”

“Which is why maybe I should. It is important not to be overconfident. That allows unforeseen mistakes to happen.”

“You think I’m overconfident?”

She went quiet as if she were afraid he might start arguing with her. Jonah tilted his head and cracked his neck. Then a piece of wood *snapped* inside the stove.

“You don’t have to answer. I know it’s true but not in the way I protect you and Heike. And I’m aware of it, which helps. I think.”

“You’re very protective over us. That didn’t even enter my mind. I was actually thinking of how you will risk your own life. And what I would do if something happened to you.”

“Oh.” So that was what she was getting at.

“Just reminding you.”

“Anything else?”

“Yes. I’m glad you awoke. I do want to talk.”

“I’m here for you.”

Jonah waited, doing his best to listen and understand what she was saying.

Not to take everything she said personally or get defensive. He and Doreen had been together long enough for him to know that she was on his side. She almost never wanted to hurt his feelings, only help him. She didn't open up or talk about sensitive subjects very often, so when she did, he was wise to listen to what she had to say.

"There's something I keep thinking about," she said. "If you are with someone and that person dies. Doesn't part of you die with them?"

"I'm not sure I follow. *With* someone?"

"It could be a romantic relationship or even a friendship. The experiences that you have together also die in a way after they're gone because it's only you who remembers it. It makes me sad to know that our lives, all of this . . . could . . . just vanish."

"No," Jonah said to the tree. "That's not going to happen. We're going to survive." Before she could ask him how he knew that, he said, "Because we have no choice." He looked over at her and saw a tear running down her cheek. "Are you all right?"

"Yes."

Which meant yes and no. "He isn't dead. Your dad." It felt like a lie.

"Thank you. I hope he . . . I know. But I was actually talking about my . . ."

"Who?"

"My deceased husband." Her voice got thick. "He was a good man. He was Heike's father. We had plans for her together. It makes me sad for him that he's gone. He doesn't know his own daughter anymore. Hasn't watched her become who she is. He'll never get to see her grow up like I will."

And he didn't have to endure the Molting, Jonah thought but wisely didn't mention. They sat in silence for a while, Doreen working on her thoughts about her husband who had died in a car accident and Jonah just wanting to be near his woman and comfort her while she feared what lay in their future. Even though they were working through some stuff, it sure was a comforting place to do that. The burning in the woodstove almost made it too warm, and although Heike was young, she knew what she was doing when she decorated a tree.

During the same holiday the year before, Heike had attached a bell to her belt because she liked the sound when it jingled. Doreen had put a quick stop to that for obvious reasons, but Heike hadn't understood until it was explained to her that she might as well be wearing a dinner bell. It was a good lesson for her, to avoid needless risks, but Heike had remained stubborn and had said, "Jonah protects us." As if she could do whatever she wanted. Jonah had taken it as a compliment.

Doreen cleared her throat, exhaled, and forced a smile. It was obvious she wanted to lend a little levity to the depth of the conversation because she said, "I wonder what the divorce rate is right now."

Jonah chuckled. "Probably pretty low. I bet there are a lot of wives putting

up with some bullshit."

"Man ideas that make them shake their heads."

"Man ideas?"

She forced another smile. "You men. Always have something important to do."

"That's why I'm with you. You're so smart."

"It's during tough periods that people need each other the most."

"Which makes you enjoy the good times even more. Both good and bad can create an even stronger bond."

"I don't believe it's either good or bad. So much happens in the middle."

"That's what I meant."

"Sure you did."

Jonah scooted closer, his bare leg next to hers, which was clothed in pajama bottoms. "Cozy right here."

"Mm-hmm." She cleared her throat. "Something like this could drive people apart too."

"For some. Not us, though, right?"

"No," she said. "Not us . . . of course it helps to be married."

That made Jonah's heart warm as much as the fire in the woodstove. It was as if it had gotten doused with gasoline. On this very couch not very long ago, their relationship had been in serious trouble, even with the Molter threat. It was difficult for anyone to be talked out of being depressed. Doreen's misery hadn't been a choice. It hadn't been because she wasn't getting along with coworkers, or was worried about what was going on in the economy or poor financial decisions, or was occupied with whatever else caused a person to feel down under normal circumstances. When they weren't running for their life.

For Doreen, it was the most unavoidable situation that could happen to a woman—losing a baby, having a miscarriage. It didn't matter to her that he hadn't even been born. It was something she had been forced to deal with. Jonah hoped she would figure it out so if something close to it happened again she would be able to deal with it better. He applied that lesson to his own life.

Except how was it possible to be normal after something like that? Some mothers got depressed even after their children were born. Doreen had never taken out her anger and frustration and sadness on him exactly, but she'd been noticeably quieter ever since, and her patience for him wasn't what it used to be. He guessed it was to be expected since they'd been together for a few years and lived in such small quarters. All of it was probably normal, but he wasn't sure. His relationship with Doreen was his longest. His marriage to Sharon hadn't even lasted a year.

Explain to Doreen that her behavior was affecting her relationships, even the one between her and Heike, would have been like spitting into the wind. The loss had changed her in many ways since, but Jonah had also noticed she'd gained strength, and she seemed to be slowly going back to how she

used to be.

Some nights she would wake up sobbing as silently as possible so as not to wake Heike or even Jonah, but being right next to her, Jonah still woke up, and he didn't always remember why it was happening, being sleepy himself. It was frustrating for him to see her in pain like that and know there was nothing he could do except be present emotionally, hold her if she wanted him to, just be near her or leave her be, and overall just have the patience to allow her to heal.

The loss hurt Jonah, too, of course and deeply, but he was good at unhealthily burying pain somewhere deep inside him. Something like that was different for a mother. Far more intense and severe for obvious reasons. It was physical, mental, emotional, and even physiological. It had changed her, just as any trauma does to a person. Shortly after her miscarriage, he would hold her while she quietly wept in their bed at night before falling asleep—when she allowed him to—after doing an admirable job of hiding how she felt during the day so Heike wouldn't see.

She hardly cried throughout the night anymore, and he never brought up what had happened. He would always listen to her if she needed to talk, as she did tonight, but he would also never remind her of her pain. As the days went on, it was as if whenever she made an *X* on the calendar—signifying how many days Henry had been away—she rediscovered something lost within herself and brought it forward. Laughing, being in the moment, forgoing those times when she would stare off at nothing, lost in thought and doing her best to act as if she were feeling fine but was not.

"I want to be your wife," Doreen said.

That marriage breadcrumb was only the latest since they'd met. "I want that too," he said. He didn't need to look over at her to see emotion. He could hear it because he knew how her breathing changed when she wept.

"And . . . I want to *try* again."

Reaching over, Jonah found her hand and gave it a squeeze. "We will. Whatever you want. All of it. Everything."

"I want you to want everything too."

"I do. But to do any of it, we need to find a safer place than here. And I will."

"How could anywhere else be safer than here?"

"More people living nearby. With knowledge I don't have."

"You're the most knowledgeable man I know."

He almost said, "I'm the only man you know right now," but that would have been a mistake, reminding her of her missing father. He was thankful for the filter he'd developed, the one missing from most young people, the same one preventing them from saying the wrong thing. Just because you think it doesn't mean you should say it.

"Thank you. I'm trained. I'm skilled in a lot of ways, but if things go wrong during childbirth, you might not survive next time. I was trained to

deal with wounds on the battlefield, but I'm not a doctor."

She sniffed. "Women used to give birth without modern-day medicine."

As softly as he could, Jonah said, "And they died during delivery too. All the time."

Doreen stared at the tree. The wind suddenly howled outside, and Jonah glanced at the woodstove that thankfully still warmed them, debating whether to throw another log on. They probably wouldn't be on the couch much longer, so he decided against it. Blinking, he realized he hadn't slept long enough because his eyes stung. He wanted them both to go back to bed but together. He was prepared to stay up as late as Doreen needed, but he hoped that wouldn't mean seeing the first hints of morning slicing through the window.

Enough sleep or not, he had tasks to accomplish, and he would just rest longer tonight, but that meant being uncomfortably tired for the rest of the day. That was getting harder to do the older he got. The mind needed rest. Jonah had gone without sleep many times throughout his life, but that didn't mean he could stifle a yawn.

Doreen squeezed his hand. "You're tired."

"So are you."

"Go back to bed. I'll be in soon."

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CHAPTER 10

Frox told Perry to keep his voice down because it carried. His paranoia was just part of who he was. Perry always wondered—out loud—if it would be him eventually. No matter how much he was reassured. Everyone but Frox and Archard likely believed that too. Frox guessed he and Perry had been having the same extended, annoying conversation for over a year. In a way, he hoped it would continue for years to come.

Frox did his best to observe past Perry's bulk, down the line of people who held their weapons at the ready. They looked as if they'd been in the exact same position for days. They practically had been, except during shift changes when rest was required, but gun barrels weren't as at the ready as they'd been since the most recent cell door had been closed. He couldn't remember how many days it had been. It felt like he hadn't slept in weeks.

Fatigue, in all aspects, was unavoidable for him because he was in charge when Archard wasn't around, and lately Archard didn't leave the firing line. And once someone was put in a cell, a continuous team needed to stay in position. Most of them were always ready, and they were only allowed a few hours of sleep a night because once the inevitable happened, they needed every shooter. No one wanted to be blamed for needless deaths because they couldn't get dressed fast enough to join the fight.

When that would happen was impossible to predict, though. One thing for sure was that a molting was going to take place. The man whose name they didn't want to think about, especially now, hadn't froze to death before the change could begin. He was still breathing in a way that made it obvious he was about to become one of them. But it had never taken so long, or at least it seemed that way to Frox. Mostly because he just wanted to get it all over with so he could get some decent rest.

"I've always been a bit of a gambler," Perry said.

"Do you really want to start betting on it?" Frox said.

"Just wondering who you think it might be is all. Something to talk about."

"Not interested."

Perry pointed. "See it now?"

"No."

"He just twitched again . . . Whenever they move like that, it means they're close."

"If he'd already molted, maybe."

"It's about to rip its flesh off. I can tell. Aww, man, this is gonna be bad."

"Keep it together."

"I am. Just letting you know what's going on by voicing my concerns, boss."

"And that's appreciated, but don't puss out on me."

"Fuck off."

Frox smirked. He was the only one Perry opened up to, and Perry on occasion talked to Frox as if he were a brother. Frox had no idea what their age difference was. They were close in age, but Perry could be younger or older. Frox had never asked. Perry treated everyone but Frox and Archard as if he were in charge of them, which he was, and his prickly honesty was intimidating to most. Likely perceived as arrogance. Perry was probably both intimidating and arrogant, but he was also reliable. The man had a work ethic close to Frox's, which was why they worked so well together. Frox aimed the binoculars down at the cell, inspecting the inside for another sign of what Perry claimed to have seen.

"All of you!" Perry shouted, causing Frox to flinch. "Keep your eyes open! On those trees in the distance!" Perry raised his assault rifle and did the same as those he commanded. "Was I right?" he said to Frox.

"It's still in one piece," Frox said. "But not for long."

It. Easier to think of him that way now. And it *was* moving now. The familiar movement of a human was slowly becoming the unfamiliar movement of one of them struggling against the bonds of rope that held its arms together. The days of preparedness were finally paying off. After the creature shook violently for about thirty seconds, a pink mist spritzed from its face.

"Told you."

"Do I seem surprised?"

Perry scanned the distance, his trigger finger looped around the trigger. "Won't take long to get its restraints off now."

It easily slipped out of its bonds, having lost the human pinky finger on both hands. Those fingers practically fell off immediately once a human molted. The thing seemed to react with disgust that any part of it was still human at all and started clawing at its face and body, ripping more flesh off itself with its newly emerged claws.

The thing didn't stop until every scrap and strand of who it had been was torn away, and the howl coming from it served a purpose. It let other Molters know prey was near. Different howls answered in the distance.

"Shit, that was fast," Perry said.

Frox had no choice but to silently agree. The howls encouraged the newborn Molter to snarl and growl in the cell, like a homing beacon for others of its kind. The incoming Molters were somehow able to sense others of their kind and had already been searching for the creature that used to be a man named Otto. Now they knew exactly where to go.

"I hate how this works," Perry said.

"Me too," Frox said.

Grips on guns tightened involuntarily all the way down the top of the fort. All that readiness quickly dissolved into a controlled panic when they heard what sounded like clothing ripping, a familiar noise to almost all of them.

"Easy," Perry said.

Then there was another rip, somewhere deeper in the woods. The armed men and women all heard it because—other than Perry, who commanded them, and Frox, who was in charge—they were completely silent and knew exactly what the sound meant: an Infector bomb, the type of Molter filled with the spiderlike things capable of causing any human to molt.

Why does sound travel so well in the forest? Frox scanned the clearing. "Great."

"Let me see," Perry said, reaching for the binoculars. Frox pulled the strap over his head and handed them over. Perry raised them, quickly painting over the distance, and then pointed them at the cell. "Let me kill it."

"What's the difference? It's not going anywhere."

"Bullshit. It's digging like a maniac."

"The longer it's alive, the more it'll draw in."

"They're almost here anyway. It's gonna get out, and then it'll be one more we're gonna have to kill. They're coming. It can't be only the noises they make that attract others. It can't be. They can smell each other or something."

"No shit." Frox grabbed and aimed his automatic rifle, looking through the scope, planting the red dot within on the creature below.

The Molter was hunched, strands of flesh and clothing hanging off it like shredded ribbons. It growled in frustration as it raked deep claws into the dirt over and over and over like a machine, scooping away mounds of earth and almost able to squeeze itself under the enclosure already. No doubt it was starving for its first kill and mysteriously drawing in more of its kind.

There was a rustling through the snowy trees in the distance, as if a powerful wind had picked up, and Perry aimed his assault rifle and fired in a random direction. The muzzle flashed blindingly.

"Cease fire!" Frox said.

Perry took his finger off the trigger after discharging half a magazine. The echo of the gunshots shot past the walls of Fort Perry and seemed to ricochet back at them as if someone was returning fire. "I might have hit one or two."

"They know exactly where we are now," Frox growled.

"Isn't that the point?"

"No, we want them to go for the—"

Perry suddenly heaved toward Frox and shoved him, then aimed at the Molter that landed near where he had just been standing and shot it until it disappeared below the part of the wall Frox almost tumbled over.

It squirmed on the ground beneath them, its back probably broken from the fall, but Perry fired the last rounds of his magazine into it anyway, killing it. Then he pulled out the empty magazine, shoved in a loaded one, and yanked the charging handle.

"Thanks," Frox said.

Perry grinned. "Those fuckers can jump."

"And climb. It came from behind us."

“It must have been a loner, a scout sent ahead. But it went for you.”

That was disturbing. Of all the people to go after, it went for the leader of the fort? “Watch your six!” Frox yelled.

The men and women were already aiming outward at all angles, each with a sector of fire that covered the entirety of the area surrounding Fort Perry, anticipating the battle that was only moments away. Those who weren’t about to be part of the fight, who actually lived at Fort Perry, were armed, too, but hiding within their tents.

“Infectors!” somebody yelled from below. One of the spotters on the ground.

The small creatures appeared, crawling across the snow as if they were trying to do it in slow motion to remain unseen. Then there were even more rips, as if Infector bombs were the second part of the offense after the scout that almost got to Frox with the specific purpose of dismantling a defensive position. Almost like a strategy.

“I *hate* ’em,” Perry said.

Infectors were already closer, skittering black shiny legs across white snow, still wet and steaming from recently erupting from inside the bodies of the many Infector bombs that had served their only purpose.

The trees in the distance growled and snarled and howled, revealing glimpses of bulbous eyes, long teeth, and razor-sharp claws. Soon after, they hit the ground and rushed the fort. There were so many of them Frox didn’t even have to give the command to open fire.

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CHAPTER 11

Doreen mentioned she'd join Jonah soon, but she stayed on the couch for a few more hours, and for some reason Jonah couldn't get to sleep even though he was tired. He guessed he had a lot on his mind too. And he missed his woman. And he was worried. She'd been so upbeat lately. He didn't want her to regress. Temporarily was fine; he could handle it, but he didn't want her depression to be as it had been before. For her sake and theirs. All of theirs.

When she finally slid into bed next to him, the smoothness of her legs touching his, Jonah's anxiety was instantly relieved. He spoke quietly. "I'm not sure when, but I *will* get us to a new home, somewhere better in every way you can imagine, and when that happens I'll get you pregnant as many times as you want. As long as it isn't more than three."

She laughed quietly. Her humor was always welcomed. That or her smile. Jonah wished he could take her picture each time she did, collect her smiles and look at them whenever he was away from her.

"We should sleep," she said.

"In a bit," he said quietly. "I have a little more to say first."

If Doreen hadn't lost the baby, who she'd named after her grandfather—she'd known he was a boy all along—things might be different. They would probably stay at the cabin for a lot longer than they planned going forward. Maybe even if Henry finally showed up. Sure Jonah had to go out almost daily to hunt down the creatures that were busily destroying humanity to protect his people, but that was likely going on everywhere else on the planet too.

It was also likely that other places in the world, the other countries, were probably doing much worse, especially where the climates were warmer and where Molters thrived. It was simple math. There were far more humans near cities and other populated areas. Humans were required to mutate, but there weren't any people around the cabin except them. And Jonah had destroyed most or all of the Behemoth cocoons in the immediate area. And potential Molters with them. Plus he was positive there weren't very many ex-soldiers who were still alive accomplishing everything he did daily.

The decision to raise a child wasn't even an easy one to begin with, when everything was normal. If their child had been born, any changes of scenery would have had to happen after he reached a certain age, unless there was no choice. But Doreen hadn't given birth, and because it was only the three of them, they could move somewhere else more easily than if they also had an infant to protect.

The miscarriage could have killed Doreen, and that possibility—some women had complicated births—made Jonah feel like they needed to leave before it was too late. As if something terrible was going to happen if they

stayed. He wasn't sure why he thought that way. He knew the cabin was under his control. It was probably the uncertainty of the future. Once they moved to a place deemed safe, they could be even more prepared for the unforeseeable, plan contingencies for the worst.

Isn't that what you've done here?

Between the move to wherever that may be, Jonah and Doreen could sure use a date night. On some beach somewhere, in the sun, without a care in the world. Dinner, too, and drinks at some great restaurant. That'd be nice. When they were together, she made him feel like they were the only couple on the planet. Somewhere nice with a great view would make their time together even more special. Sometimes Jonah wondered if they were the last couple on Earth. Sort of romantic actually.

"Do you really think it's possible?" Doreen whispered.

Her voice brought him back to reality. Jonah got lost in thought so easily these days. The older he got, the more it happened. Probably because he spent so much time away and also because he had so much to figure out. "Is what possible?"

"To find somewhere better?"

Not that he needed to but Jonah considered it again, even though that question had ricocheted around the interior of his active mind more times than he could ever count. "Yeah, I do. But I would miss living here."

"Me too. It's interesting how you're often nostalgic about a place where you've lived."

"It is. Even ones you don't like."

"Really?"

"Being deployed to the desert was like living in an ashtray. But those sunsets were really something."

"I don't want to get pregnant and be unmarried."

If he had just drank something, he would have choked. That's what he loved about their conversations. They could be all over the place when it came down to subject, and the locations were unique to them alone. Currently in the dark and in their bed.

"I realize things happen, but next time I want my pregnancy to be planned."

"So, you want to be Mrs. Browne?"

"Mm-hmm."

"Doreen Browne. How's that sound to you?"

"It sounds good. I like it."

"I want your dad to be at our wedding."

Her inhale sounded like a gasp but a pleasant one. She scooted closer and kissed him on the cheek. "You've been married before. So have I."

Jonah waited. "And?"

"And we both aren't anymore."

"I'm confused. I thought you wanted—"

"I do . . . but I'm afraid."

"Of what?" he said as he tried to get a sense of her voice, unable to read into what she meant. "That it doesn't work?"

"Things change. Even the world around us. For some reason I'm afraid something like marriage doesn't matter anymore."

Now Jonah was really confused. She was struggling a lot more than he knew. "It will matter for Heike and our other children one day."

"I go back and forth about it. I love the idea, but do you really think it's important? With everything as it is?"

"Definitely. Absolutely I do. Even more so. It's one of the customs that makes us human and being human is what we have over those bloodsucking creatures. It's like me washing my hands even after I take a p—go number one. Not behaving like animals makes us superior. That's how I see it anyway."

He shouldn't have brought *them* up. Their mention had no place during this particular conversation, but technically they had already been mentioned. The Molting was what Doreen was referring to.

Wanting to change the subject even further, Jonah said, "I couldn't think of us making that kind of commitment unless Henry gave me his blessing."

"I know he would."

"I want to hear it from him personally."

"You respect him."

"I do."

The year Henry had insisted they stay had elapsed well over a year ago. It had almost been two. Jonah didn't want to upset Doreen—he never did—but he suspected the worst because Henry was missing. If it were in his power, he would have arrived at the cabin already, so it was obvious that something had gone wrong. It didn't change their hope that he was all right, no matter Jonah's misgivings, and he had meant everything he'd said to Doreen. It would be ideal for Jonah to get Henry's blessing to marry his daughter and then shake his hand.

Henry had also said he would find a safe place, and Jonah had believed him, but that might not even be possible anymore. It was one of the main reasons they remained at the cabin. Henry's hope and vigilance were admirable, but if he was gone, then so was what he intended. The reality was that every decision was now Jonah's.

Moving on, figuring out where to go next, would eventually be his main mission. So far his main mission had been to keep the cabin clear of threats. The timing wasn't right for such a drastic change. Not now. Not yet. It would be smarter to wait for spring, so that was what he planned on doing.

As if reading his mind, Doreen said, "My father is a man of his word. If he says he'll be here, he will."

They were communicating well right now, maybe because they were in bed and both so tired, and he didn't want something to slip out that would

make them take a step backward. He was a little fearful of saying the wrong thing. Doreen was very protective of her father, even though she'd spent many years of her life without him in it.

Doreen's parents had gotten a divorce when she was a little girl, and Henry had chosen a career in America. Even though Doreen was sensing his thoughts somehow, just as many women were able to sense what a man was thinking as if they possessed supernatural power, Jonah needed to be careful and not upset her.

Being conflicted about many things wasn't uncommon as of late. He knew they should leave the cabin at some point, but he didn't know exactly when or where, and he wanted Doreen to be realistic about her missing father. He also didn't want her to be upset at him for stating the obvious, as if it were his fault. Not everything was worth getting into during one conversation.

He wanted Doreen to see things his way, how they likely would never see Henry again. All Jonah's hopes of him showing up and Jonah asking for his permission to marry his daughter were probably nothing but a fantasy. There were immediate tasks that required attention, and dwelling on fantasies was not one of them. Even though Jonah felt that way, there was still a little hope in there somewhere.

"I want to take her hunting tomorrow," Jonah said. "She may have to kill a Molter one day. On her own."

"What does hunting have to do with that?"

"Nerves. Firing a weapon at a moving target. Think back to basic training. A little nerve-racking firing a weapon under pressure for the first time."

"Yes. Even for you?"

"Yeah, but remember I was only twelve."

"What kind of animal would you hunt for?"

"Not many options. Preferably a deer but probably a rabbit."

"Rabbits aren't always moving."

"It's more about following through with the killing. She needs to know how. She needs to be ready."

Jonah waited.

"I want you to take a two-way radio with you when you go on missions from now on."

"Doreen—"

"*Shh*. Because of what happened in the cave. Even though I know what they remind you of."

The sight of the two-way radios produced a nauseating, almost visceral response somewhere inside him, reminding him of when he'd thought Doreen's life was in danger. They were the ones they'd used when Jonah went out on his burial missions. He would never forget what he had been doing at the exact moment he'd heard the panic in her voice.

The snow had been falling hard, and he had just brushed his thumb over the hard plastic of the compass, wiping away the flurries enough to see the

direction to the next fake burial site he would dig. He was just about to take the first step of the planned paces. Instead he needed to grab the radio and thumb the call button. When he asked what was wrong, something obviously was because Doreen just replied for him to come home.

When Jonah thought of the radios, he was reminded of the baby they'd lost, and that was the main reason he hadn't taken one with him since. That, but also if looters were on the same frequency, heard their conversations, and somehow deciphered them and discovered the cabin . . .

"I feel the same way, but we need to get over it," Doreen said. "It's rather silly. They're not responsible for what happened. And what you do is dangerous. I don't want you to get trapped again."

"I won't."

"I know, but if you do—"

"Doreen—"

"You'll be able to contact me. If you need to. *And* it makes sense because you're a soldier."

"Not anymore. I got kicked out."

"Not of the present war. We're all soldiers whether we like it or not. That includes you, so there should be a base. Right?"

Of course there should be. Why hadn't he thought of it that way before? "Right. Except what if someone is on our channel somehow?"

"Wouldn't that be positive? You're assuming it would be bad people."

"You know how I think. I just hate being surprised."

"It's a risk but a very low one. Hardly likely at all. If we ever encounter others, it will probably be because we choose to, and you will already know where they are. We have plenty of batteries. We might as well make use of them. And I have another request."

Jonah wasn't the only one who had done some thinking. "What?" he said.

"I don't want to say *over* at the end of every sentence."

Jonah laughed quietly. "Well, how will we know when to end the communication? What about *over and out*?"

"Over and out is fine."

He blew out all his air. "OK, well, I don't always want to have it on. If you contact me, it could make me a target somehow. I'll just check in often. Plus, I don't want to waste batteries."

"I think we have plenty, Jonah. When we're out of all those batteries you've collected, we'll both be a hundred and fifty. But I'll have mine on as long as you're gone, and you contact me whenever . . . or just to talk."

"When it's safe. OK. It's a good idea. I agree. Is there another reason?"

She hesitated in the dark. "Yes. Honestly just to hear your voice. I miss you while you're away."

"I miss you too. I wouldn't be away at all if I didn't have to be."

"I know, but if you weren't who you are, if I wasn't with a man who was so capable, I wouldn't be able to trust my daughter's life with him."

"Does that mean what I think it does? That I can take her hunting?"

"Yes."

"Really? Thank you."

"You're welcome. That's the other reason I want you to be able to contact me."

Jonah should have thought of it. "Anything else?"

"Please be careful tomorrow."

Jonah had been preparing Heike for her first hunt by reiterating the basics of gun safety for months. Target practice while standing in place was one thing; walking with a loaded weapon was quite another. "I will. I appreciate you trusting me with her. I'll leave the radio on whenever she's with me. That'll be the exception so you can check in whenever you want. How's that sound?"

"Good."

"And if something happens, I'll warn you off if I need to."

"Yes. I wouldn't want to give away your position if . . . *they* are near."

They're always around somewhere, he thought but didn't say it. Then he suddenly thought of something else that could go wrong. "If I ever contact you and say, 'Anybody copy? Over.' I'm in trouble and can't speak freely. You won't have trouble remembering because you don't want to say over."

"Got it, but why not just tell me what's going on if something happens?"

"I will if I can. It's just a contingency to warn you in case something's wrong and I can't explain for some reason."

"What should I do if you say that?"

"Nothing. Someone might find a two-way radio very interesting and wonder who's on the other end. They might be very curious where that's located. We have to protect this place."

"My Jonah, always backing up the backup plans."

"If I'm good for anything, right?"

"You're good at too many things to count."

"That's nice of you to say. But I still make mistakes."

"Everyone does."

Something had been gnawing at him for long enough. "There's something else that's been on my mind. I want to talk about that day a while back."

"What day?"

"When I got drunk and said those horrible things."

"That was a long time ago."

"Not really."

"Feels that way."

"Not to me. I threatened to leave."

"I remember."

"And I couldn't understand your silence or what you were going through, and my expectations were absurd."

"You left for a little while, but you came back. We were arguing a lot back

then. We do that sometimes."

"I know, but I've realized something, and I'm not sure if it will make sense."

"I always like to listen to you. Sometimes it's a riddle."

"I've been through enough to know that sometimes you can look back and wish you would have done something different, to change things so that the very bad thing that happened, that you didn't want to happen, didn't happen at all. That was one of those times for me. If I'd left—"

"You wouldn't have."

"In my drunken stupor, I wasn't myself. My point is, all I've done in my past is fuck up. I don't ever want to be that way again. And I won't ever do something like that again."

"I know that."

"Sometimes I feel like I need to reassure you. Not just for you but for me. If that makes any sense. You've been so patient with me, and I can't say I have been as patient with you."

"You have."

"I can do better. And I will. You are my world. I love you, Doreen. Every decision I've made since then is to keep us safe. As safe as possible. No more slipping for me. I just wanted you to know."

Doreen was silent for a while, until she said, "I love you, too. Sometimes what you say is complicated. I'll think about what you've said. I'm ready to go to sleep now. But first . . ." As she trailed off, she kissed him.

They hugged, kissed some more, and then quietly made love.

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CHAPTER 12

"I know I like to joke around sometimes, but today I need to be serious, to be safe, so don't let it hurt your feelings. OK?"

"OK."

"We need to stay about two meters apart."

"How far is that?"

"About three steps."

"Why?"

Jonah glanced over at Heike as she hunted to his left. She wore a purple coat suitable for winter in that it was bulky and puffy all over. Her face was somewhere in the middle of all of that warm wrapped around her head, but Jonah couldn't see her face from the side. She didn't quite understand everything he was telling her, but all that mattered was she was listening to him. And doing as she was told.

"Muzzle awareness," he said. "The spacing allows us to aim our weapons safely, especially if prey appears. A generous sector of fire will allow either of us to shoot without endangering each other."

"Like taking turns?"

"In a way, I suppose. Yes."

As the two trudged through the snow, trees occasionally groaned or even cracked around them. The rise in temperature between night and morning had caused ice to melt. Wind grabbed hold of snow and blew it wherever it wished. Some gusts were so powerful they caused Jonah to look up for falling branches. If an entire tree fell to the ground, he wouldn't have been surprised. At one point it looked as if Heike were knocked off balance, but she'd simply taken a misstep.

Jonah held his silenced 9mm pistol, the weapon that had brought down many a cunning beast, including the prey they were currently hunting: the elusive rabbit. Because he consistently cleared the territory, the things they actually feared had been sparse as of late. He knew it was by his doing, and by no means were they out of danger, but it was daytime, and it was pleasant to be outside as humans were supposed to be and immersed in one of their most primal behaviors. It was especially fun because it was Heike's first hunt. She also carried a silenced pistol but a smaller caliber.

"Keep your finger off the trigger."

Heike's finger moved off the trigger and out of the trigger guard. "I always forget."

Jonah thought for a moment. "That's because you're telling yourself not to forget."

"What?"

"You should try to *remember* not to do it. If you try not to *forget*, the

definition of the word registers. Thus that's what you do. Or don't do. Understand?"

"Um . . . Not really."

"Whenever I need to remember something, I tell myself to remember, not forget. When I used to tell myself not to forget, then I often did because forgetting is what forget means, but if I tell myself to remember, I won't. I'll remember."

"Oh."

"Whatever I tell you, if you don't understand, that's OK. I'll explain it again if you want."

"OK."

"Just so you know."

"Thanks, Jonah."

"You're welcome. You're doing great." Spying an opportunity to complement her and boost her confidence even more, he said, "You're holding the weapon correctly. Your finger's not on the trigger, and the muzzle is pointed at the ground." Her finger sneaked back onto the trigger, but she took it off again, remembering. "Keep the pistol low but ready to raise up and aim and fire while maintaining muzzle awareness."

She looked over at him. "Muzzle is at the end of the gun, right?"

"At the end of the *barrel*, yes."

"And muzzle awareness means at the ground?"

"No, it means making sure you always know where your weapon is aiming. The ground is usually the safest place to aim. You aim at the ground until . . ."

"Until I'm ready to shoot."

"That's right. And only aim at what you intend to shoot." Her finger found its way onto the trigger again. "Your trigger finger, Heike. Come on now."

Heike made a sound that only eight-year-old girls could make. "I'm sorry. It's just easier to hold it that way."

"That's true. It is, but don't do it anymore. It's easy to develop bad habits. Even with weapons."

"Like what?"

"Well . . . when I was in the war, another soldier would use his thumb to flick the selector switch on his weapon from safe to fire incessantly."

"Selector switch?"

"The safety."

"And what's incessantly?"

"It means nonstop."

"He really did it that much?"

"Nothing ever happened. He never accidentally pulled the trigger, but you understand my point?"

"Don't develop bad habits."

"And why is that?"

"*That's how accidents happen*," she said, as if she'd heard Jonah say it a thousand times.

"That's right. Bad habits can be dangerous. I mean how would you feel if you accidentally shot your favorite stuffy?"

She snickered. "She's not even out here with us."

"She might be one day. That would be something though, right? A gigantic version of your stuffy we had to put down."

"That's not funny."

"Sorry. Just kidding."

"Do you see many bears out here?"

"No. Not one."

"They got them?"

"I believe so."

"But there's deer and rabbits?"

"Yes, but it's much more difficult to hunt down deer and rabbits *for them* . . . Rabbits might be the next species we have to contend with."

"Because they like to make so many babies?"

"They sure do." Suddenly uncomfortable anywhere close to *the talk*, he said, "Explain why you need to keep your finger off the trigger."

"Didn't I do that already?"

"Tell me again."

"Because I'm not ready to shoot yet."

"What's the other reason? It's the most important thing to remember . . . I've told you before." Jonah pointed at some branches sticking out of the snow. "Watch where you're going so you don't trip. I just gave you a hint."

Her posture straightened as she looked ahead. "I remember! Because it's loaded."

"And how often to you treat a weapon as if it's loaded?"

"Always."

"That's right. And why is that?"

"Because thinking of a weapon as loaded is the safest way to handle them. Even if it isn't."

He smiled at his own words. "Right. Think about what would happen if you had your finger on the trigger and fell."

"I might accidentally shoot?"

"Right. And we don't want that."

"So I don't accidentally shoot Feather."

Jonah laughed. "Who's Feather?"

"My stuffy."

"I thought your stuffy was a bear?"

"Oh, I have lots."

The two continued through the snow-blanketed forest. There was no hint of the game they were after as of yet. Branches that had snapped off during the freeze stuck up through fresh powder from the most recent snowfall. It was

pleasant to hear some birds in the distance scattered among the groans of the trees, but it was impossible to tell which kind because Jonah couldn't see them. Still, the sound of them felt reassuring.

The presence of birds probably meant Molter numbers were low or zero. If Molters were close, or close enough to be considered a threat, there wouldn't be the sounds of any living things at all. Not that Molters fed on birds or considered them a reliable food source—if they could even get their claws on them—but birds often left territory that was dangerous. With birds around it meant the area was safe enough to go trudging through the woods during the daytime and armed while doing it. Today anyway.

"We've gone far enough," Jonah said.

"But we haven't got a rabbit yet."

"I know. We'll take a right here and make our way around. Still close to home but not so far as to worry your mom."

"Can't we just contact her on the radio again?"

"Yes, but us being away is what worries her. And I don't like to keep you away from her for too long."

"She's always worried."

Jonah snorted. "What?"

"She is. She doesn't say it, but I can tell."

Jonah inhaled and exhaled thoughtfully. "She's been through a lot."

"I know."

"She's getting better, though."

Heike didn't say anything for a while, as if she were mulling something over. "Are *you* all right, Jonah?"

He noticed she was still holding the pistol correctly, aimed at the ground, and her trigger finger outside the trigger guard. For some reason her question made him glad they were on a mission. "Yes."

"I heard you . . . your tears before."

He exhaled, thinking he sounded like an old man would, and knew she must have been referring to the day Doreen lost the baby. He wished he could think of another lesson to teach Heike, but unfortunately he was trapped. He had to discuss this with her. "I'm doing better. It was difficult. Thank you for asking."

"You're welcome," she said. "Why do you call a gun a weapon?"

He felt himself grin. That was painless. Heike could change the subject as easily as Doreen could. She said what she needed to say and then moved on. It was likely she'd learned it from Jonah too. "Because that's what it is."

"What about your machete?"

Jonah tapped the handle of the long blade dangling from his side. "It's a weapon also."

"But you don't call a machete a weapon. You call it a machete."

"True." Jonah scratched at his deep, brown beard. "Hmm. You know what?"

"What?"

"I don't remember why I think that way, but I'm pretty sure I learned it while I was in the military. Let me think . . . Had something to do with describing various guns, as you civilians call them."

She extended her arm and with that the pistol. "I'm not a civilian. I'm a rabbit hunter!"

"Heike, you gotta be serious while holding a weapon."

She shifted herself and all her winter clothes toward him, and her little smile vanished. "OK."

"A gun isn't just called a weapon. That's just the beginning of its description. Every weapon is a weapon system, and each has its own destructive capability, like the size of the round . . . Do you know what that means?"

"The bullets?"

"That's right and how fast it can shoot. How many bullets per minute if it's an automatic. A machine gun. A semiautomatic means how fast you can pull the trigger. So, whenever I say weapon, I mean gun."

"Is this pistol a semiautomatic?"

"Yes."

"Is yours?"

"Yes."

"Is a weapon still a weapon even when it's not loaded?"

"Remember what I told you."

"A weapon is always loaded."

"You treat it that way," he said, "for safety reasons. But to answer your question, yes."

"Is a weapon is always loaded something you learned in the military too?"

"No, reinforced while I served, but it was my dad who taught me that."

"Well, that makes sense, and I like to know things that make sense."

"Then you and I are alike."

Heike seemed satisfied with the idea because her pace quickened, and Jonah had to pick up his own to keep up with her. She turned her whole body toward him again, as if she were unable to do that with just her head due to the restrictions of her winter wear, and she smiled. Then it went away as suddenly as it appeared. "Is the rest of the world like it is here?"

"No." He could have sugarcoated it, but how would that help her? Or himself? What purpose would it serve? She needed to know the truth to remain strong. He was always ready for that particular question. "It's probably worse."

"Why?"

"One reason is because we control our territory."

"Around home you mean?"

"Yes."

"It's worse in other places because there's more people?"

"More who can molt, which likely makes those places out of control. They can't do what I do around here."

They walked in silence for a while. *Thumps* of snow clumps could be heard somewhere in the endless forest surrounding them. If Jonah didn't have such a terrific sense of direction—his natural navigation skills were something he'd discovered while in basic training—they would've gotten lost easily. The white ground and snow-encrusted trees probably looked the same in every direction to most people. But some, like himself, had a natural homing instinct, like a cat.

They'd lived at the cabin for almost two years, and Jonah went out daily, except on Sundays, so the landscape practically had legible road signs. He even went out when he didn't need to. He disguised these missions as *necessary*, but they were often only to stay busy. He needed his missions, and Doreen either wasn't aware or just didn't mind because she never voiced any concerns about their quantity.

"Can I ask you something?" Heike said.

"Yes."

"It's more of a favor."

"OK. What?"

"Can we speak Deutsch when we're out like this?"

Assuming Doreen will allow it, he thought. "But your mom wants you to speak English."

"I do, to you."

"You don't speak Deutsch with your mom?"

"Yes, but I also want to speak it with you."

"Well, I can't keep a secret from her," Jonah said. "OK if I ask her first?"

"Yes."

"If she says it's OK, how about you speak Deutsch and I'll respond in English?"

"And then we'll trade languages, and I'll speak English and you speak Deutsch?"

"Sure, but I thought you wanted to speak Deutsch?"

"I do but both."

"I'm OK with you doing whatever you want, but we have to get permission first."

"OK."

"Why do you want to speak Deutsch so much?"

There was a hint of emotion in Heike's voice as she said, "I want to remember who I am."

Even children could be wise. Every once in a while when Jonah thought he'd figured everything out, that he'd accounted for all the blips on his radar, a little girl reminded him of something that should always be kept in mind. *Remember who you were and you'll know who you are.*

"That way you won't make the same mistakes and become someone you

despise," Jonah said rhetorically.

Heike shifted toward him. "What?"

Jonah was about to carefully explain a few wretched acts from his past in a way Heike could relate to, somehow, when movement caught his eye. "Look there."

There was a rustling in a snow-dusted bush ahead at ground level, something unseen as of yet—hopefully something with gray fur and long ears. Whatever it was moved about in the prickly, dead parts of the dense undergrowth deadened by winter. Jonah raised his silenced pistol up at the ready, and Heike did the same as they waited for their intended prey.

"One shot, one kill," Jonah said.

The head of Heike's coat dipped forward on his left, a nod of understanding by her, he knew, even without seeing her face. They were as still as the trees around them, waiting for what they hoped was a rabbit for Heike to shoot. It wasn't as if there was an alternative method for the hunt because they couldn't give chase. Once a rabbit knew it was seen, it was very good at disappearing or turning to stone.

The rather large critter finally emerged, gray as they expected and like the many others Jonah had brought home, and it must not have realized the danger it was in because suddenly all of it was exposed. It hadn't seen them yet or didn't care or wasn't alarmed by aiming weapons or their conversation. It was likely it had never seen humans before.

Squeeze the trigger, Jonah thought. *Don't jerk it.* And moments later he heard a *crack* from Heike's silenced weapon, and then the sizable rabbit was on its side. "Nice shot."

Heike had already taken her finger off the trigger and lowered the weapon to her side. "Thanks."

"See the casing?"

She dipped forward as if she were bowing to see over her warm coat. "Yes."

"It might still be hot, so roll it around, submerge it in the snow, before you pick it up and put it in your pocket."

Heike nodded and bent down, holding the pistol out but still aimed at the ground—he was so proud of her—and dug around in the snow before she picked out the spent casing with her gloved hand.

"You know why we do that?"

"Same reason as during target practice."

"Tell me."

"We don't litter."

"And?"

"No one will know we were here . . . What about our footprints?"

"The next snowfall will take care of those. And once its spring, there won't be any because they will melt."

"Aren't there people who can track other people?"

"Yes, but those people would show up at the cabin, probably not cross paths with us accidentally while we're out hunting." She got a worried look on her face. "Don't worry. I won't let that happen. If there was anyone out here with us, I would know."

She twisted toward him. "May I retrieve my bunny?"

A chill moved through him suddenly, and he knew why just as instantaneously. It was something very old and ancient, a primal instinct. They had just killed a prey animal, which meant it was possible another predator might challenge them for it. Jonah was always as cautious as possible. It was possible for even him to become complacent, even though he advised others not to let it happen. He got a vision of Heike stepping toward the rabbit only to encounter one of *them* instead. Jonah scanned the trees above.

"Jonah?" Heike said. "My bunny?"

He finished the inspective sweep all around them. *Clear.* "Yours? I thought we were in this together?"

She giggled and took a step. "I can get him?"

"Go ahead."

Heike took careful steps toward her kill, but when she was standing above it, she stood in place, unmoving, as if she weren't sure what to do next.

"Grab it by the feet," Jonah said.

Heike sniffed instead. It was to be expected, even though he'd hoped she wouldn't be so sensitive, but Heike couldn't change who she was. He trudged through the powdery snow and helped her stare down at the dead rabbit. She sniffed again, and he saw her wipe at her cheeks with her gloved hand. Her shot had punctured right through the rabbit's side, and there were splats of red over the white snow behind the corpse.

"It's so cute."

"It is."

"I don't like killing," she said and sniffed again.

"I don't either. I know it's difficult. But sometimes we have to. And we always need to have something to eat."

"We already have food. In cans and army food and you've said you know where more is."

"Yes, but we might need all that in an emergency. I don't know how long we'll be able to hunt rabbits."

"I shouldn't have called him a bunny." *Sniff.* "He looks like a stuffy."

"Can I tell you something?"

"Yeah."

"There are some animals on this planet that are supposed to be eaten. It's their purpose. They're called prey animals."

"Like rabbits?"

"Yes."

"What else?"

"Deer. They only live a few years."

"Same with rabbits?"

"Yep."

"No matter what?"

"No, if they're kept as pets, they'll live longer. But that isn't natural."

Heike swallowed loudly and sniffed again. Jonah had allowed her to be emotional, but now he needed her to regain her composure. He unbuttoned a side pocket and pulled out a tissue from a whole packet of them and handed it to her.

"Thank you."

"You're welcome."

Showing emotion was not a weakness, but the reality was living with females required tissues. Jonah had needed a hankie on occasion too. While out searching he did his best to never leave tissue or toilet paper behind.

Heike dabbed at her nose. "Thank you, rabbit."

He rubbed her back. "Thanks, rabbit."

She looked up at him and exhaled. "What about us?"

"Us?"

"People. Are we prey animals?"

"No," he said sharply. "We're predators."

"How do you know? What's the difference between us and them?" She blushed. "I know you know things, Jonah, but I don't always, and I want to understand."

He nodded. "Our eyes face forward. The eyes of prey animals are on the side of their heads."

"Why?"

"Why what?"

"Why is there a difference between forward eyes and side eyes?"

"Predators, hunters like humans, need forward-facing eyes for depth perception to hunt. Prey animals need side eyes for a larger field of vision so they can spot the hunters."

"And get away and not get eaten?"

"It helps."

"But a Molter's eyes face forward. And they feed on *us*."

"If they can catch us." Jonah tried to think of something else to say to make Heike feel better, but she knew too much, was way too smart, so he told her the truth. "Not with me around."

Heike forced a smile in a way that looked just like her mom. Then it vanished, and she bent down and grabbed the rabbit by the feet, hefting it upward.

Jonah took the radio out of his pocket. "Base, this is Two."

Moments later: "*Go ahead, Two*."

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CHAPTER 13

Heike's feelings about her first kill were understandable. Jonah had felt the same way; except for him, it had been while fishing. He remembered feeling very sad for the trout as it gasped for air before his dad placed it on the fish stringer with the others and dropped them all over the side of the boat. Jonah had watched it swim in place, gills opening and closing while submerged in the lake, hoping it would break free and swim away. It had been so long ago, and he was so different as a grown man—he wasn't so softhearted—it was almost as if he were remembering a story about someone else.

Heike kept raising the dead rabbit up and looking at it as they made their way back. "It's heavy."

Jonah had taken Heike's pistol, ejected the magazine, removed the silencer, and put it all in a cargo pocket to free up both her hands. "Want me to carry it?"

"No thanks."

Jonah could tell she wanted to show it off. "When we get back, I'll bring your mom out so she can see."

"OK."

"Let me see you practice holding it up."

Heike looked at the rabbit as she raised it as high as she could, then tripped on something under the snow and almost fell.

"Careful."

"I am," she said. "Like this."

Then she raised it again and put on a smile so big it made Jonah laugh. "That's perfect."

The radio chirped, and Jonah quick drew it. Doreen was contacting them again for some reason. He didn't hear her voice, so he thumbed the call button. "Base?"

He waited. She was thumbing the call button, too, but wasn't saying anything. Something was wrong.

With concern, Heike said, "Jonah?"

"No more talking. We gotta get home fast," he said.

Heike nodded.

When the cabin was in sight, Jonah also saw Doreen was on the porch. Waiting for them and waving. No, it wasn't a wave. She was trying to get their attention because she pointed two fingers at her eyes and then at the cabin. There was trouble inside the cabin? He wondered.

"Stay behind me," Jonah said to Heike.

Heike was no longer beaming with pride; she was alarmed because of his tone, and she lowered the rabbit she was already holding up to show off to her mom. Doreen motioned for them to come forward. She pointed two fingers at

her eyes again, then one behind her. There wasn't trouble inside the cabin but behind it.

"Go to your mom," Jonah said.

Heike ran, rabbit held up with both hands, and it jostled back and forth. Doreen opened the door and said, "Go inside." Heike did as she was told.

"What is it?" Jonah said.

"Them," she said. "It's not your fault."

Jonah was stunned. "Where exactly?"

"Coming up the hill."

It was still quite a few hours away from getting dark, and that was when they usually showed if they were going to, and his clearing had always been very dependable. Enough for him to feel in control. They rarely got close, and he hated being caught off guard. That simply meant he'd been a civilian for too long, he realized, and his bafflement was only short lived. No sense in being surprised by what could happen every day.

He pulled his pistol out of its holster beneath his jacket and reattached the silencer to the end of the barrel, twisting and clicking it in place. "How many?"

"At least three. If they were closer, I would have taken care of them."

"I'm a better shot."

"That's why I didn't. What do you want me to do?"

"Go back inside. Here, Heike's." He handed her Heike's pistol, silencer, and magazine from his cargo pocket. "I'll take care of them."

"Be careful."

"I will. Love you."

They kissed quickly.

"Love you too," she said.

Doreen went inside before shutting the door firmly behind her and locking it, and Jonah crept around the cabin, sticking close to the wall. He peeked around the corner, 9mm raised and ready to fire, and advanced, closing in on the place where Doreen had said she'd spotted them.

Slowly, he rounded the back of the cabin and leaned out, trying to spot any movement at all. He saw nothing but tried to identify hints of them down the hill: the sound of their steps in the snow, the snap of twigs or underbrush, or howling or growling. He waited.

The problem with hunting hunters was they often knew when to be still. Jonah spied down the iron sights and panned left to right, then up in the trees before lowering his sight picture across a never-ending blanket of white. There was nothing that gave away the creatures that were surely nearby. Just winter and its wind blowing around what frosty snow it could. He was just about to squat down and wait even longer, thinking that maybe they hadn't seen the cabin or ignored it and then bypassed it when he saw them.

They were moving up the hill together in a pack; they were hunched and wore ragged clothing that their arms stuck out of, revealing pale skin that

practically blended in with the snow around them. Sunken, bulbous eyes and sharp teeth that looked too big for their mouths stuck out on their faces. They looked like the original ones he'd encountered, different than the one with all the teeth along its mouth and green skin that he'd killed in the cave. There seemed to be different strains.

Great.

Other than their teeth and claws and their primitive, dangerous instincts, Molters didn't have weapons, which was why Jonah stepped into their view intending to spur them to come at him. Even if there were more than the three in his sector of fire, he was confident he could kill them all. He had a full magazine, Heike had been the only one of them who had fired a weapon, and if he ran out of bullets, he'd pull his machete.

When they saw him, they squatted low as if they were going to drop to all fours and spread out. One quickly climbed up the nearest tree, surely intent on sprawling on him when he passed beneath. When its head turned toward him, nearly to the first branch, Jonah shot it somewhere in its side, and it fell to the snow in pain, clutching at its wound and snarling.

Luckily it was still in view, squirming, so he immediately shot it again—in the head—and killed it. The silenced *cracks* from the pistol hardly made a sound.

The other two separated and charged him from different directions, intent on flanking him. He shot the one on his left in the legs and then its chest, slowing its momentum until it fell, and the other was already almost on him, snarling, then howling, an attempt to alert others. It was so close that Jonah didn't have to squeeze the trigger for accuracy. He jerked it and shot the Molter in the throat, causing it to make a choking sound. Its head whipped back and forth, and then it fell on its side, bleeding all over the deep white powder.

Jogging to where the other Molter had fallen—the one he'd shot in the legs—he saw that it was still alive. It was trying to stand but couldn't, and it was bleeding out from the gunshots. It made a motion as if it wanted to get to one of Jonah's legs, snarling and baring its teeth-filled mouth angrily, unable to resist its drive to feed even though it was dying.

A shot to the head turned it as dead as the others. Jonah poked its chest with the end of the silencer. When it didn't move and he was sure, he scanned the area for any indication that there were more of them.

After another forty-five minutes, he hustled back up the hill.

The freeze would keep the corpses intact before he had to get rid of them. Molters were the only predator that had been spotted since their arrival at the cabin, and they'd likely fed on anything else with teeth, so it wasn't as if another predator would eat them. Jonah didn't know them to be cannibals.

He did his best to seem normal after what he'd done, asking Doreen what she thought of Heike's first kill. She said she was very proud of her, and he was sure that was true, but her enthusiasm was forced. No way around it. She was rattled by what had just happened, and he was sure Heike was, too, even if she hadn't seen the Molters before ducking inside.

Jonah was also shaken by it, if he were honest with himself. Molters weren't supposed to be able to get that close, and it was rare for them to be out during daylight. And their most recent outing, the hunt with Jonah and Heike—another experience in their lives—was now tainted by them.

Recent events meant Jonah would be even more vigilant for a while, which meant he would behave as if an invasion were imminent, and the ladies would go outside only to use the outhouse. His worst fear was a day when as many of them appeared in real life as they did in his bad dreams about them—so many that their numbers stretched across the planet, and Jonah, Doreen, and Heike were the last humans alive.

It was somewhat ridiculous because the Earth was mostly ocean, but it was an image that flickered into his mind enough—the nightmare of millions attacking at once—that it fueled him. If he killed Molters whenever they crossed his path, it was less he would need to kill in the future and also less that would take human lives. Part of Jonah's fear was somewhat realistic—the part about them being the last humans—because he hadn't seen another person since they'd left Henrytown.

The fact that he'd had to kill the three on the hill was really pissing him off. He hated that Molters had practically destroyed everything established, the normalcy of every day existence, and it was another example of him letting his guard down. Although he was hard on himself—and that was on purpose—his overconfidence continued to get him into situations that endangered others, and he couldn't allow that to happen anymore, especially because he'd reassured Doreen so recently.

Patiently teaching Heike to hunt should have waited. They'd gone out too far, and if Doreen weren't a former soldier with training and practiced caution, the Molters might have surprised her. An image of her down on the ground and being fed upon briefly pried its way into his mind, but he kicked it out just as quickly.

How were they so close?

It made no sense to him. His hunts—for Molters and Behemoths—were too regimented to surprise him like that. Eliminating cocoons ensured a Molter sighting was not only rare but also somewhat impossible. Where had those three come from? What direction had they been headed in? Did they know where they were going, or was it random? Jonah knew they weren't desperate to feed and starving. They didn't really survive that way. When there was nothing to eat, they shut down, turned off like a machine, and hibernated.

Maybe they'd emerged from a cave like the one he'd discovered, or maybe

they were hunting across long distances now, which also made sense. It wasn't as if Molters had something better to do. And it wasn't as if they were being tracked as other predators had been in recent history by humans, tagged and then studied, and in recent decades from a computer.

They may have come from the opposite side of the country for all he knew or another one entirely. He wasn't sure how far they hunted, but they did need to rest, but that could be day or night, and that irritated him, the not knowing. He also didn't know where to begin to find answers to his recent questions. For now, there were too many of them, and because of that—and also because of everything else that had transpired—they all agreed to go to bed early.

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CHAPTER 14

The engines sputtered, causing the other passengers to voice their panic. Judging by the way they were reacting, the plane was going to crash. He had a row to himself, but none of the flight attendants would stop whenever he asked them a question or even slow down when he shouted at them. They only mumbled something unintelligible, their lips moving as if they were talking to someone other than him. They just kept zipping past him as if they were running away from something, heading in the opposite direction of the cockpit.

What was even stranger was how all of the flight attendants resembled each other. They looked like the same woman passing by him over and over again, as if the aircraft were attended by clones. They all had blonde hair, too much makeup that was running down their cheeks from sobbing, and the same expression on their faces; they were terrified.

When he stood to get a better look at the layout of the plane itself and try to get the attention of anyone else long enough to answer a question or two, he found he couldn't even get out of his seat. He glanced down to see the seatbelt was clasped, but there was also another one somehow tied around his waist. It looked impossible to remove without cutting through it.

Every attempt at unravelling the knots only turned it into more seatbelt spaghetti. Whenever he tried to stand, he hit his head on the overhead bins located directly above him, far lower than on any other plane he'd ever been on, bringing on feelings of claustrophobia.

The other passengers were blocking his view of whatever was causing the clones to do a poor job of hiding their terror. Somehow he was the only one trapped by seatbelts. He searched his waistband for the machete he always kept there. After yanking it out of its sheath, he sliced through the belts as if they were made of yarn, stood and ducked at the same time, and then pushed his way into the aisle.

The engines groaned and shook the floor, struggling to accommodate the weight of all the passengers, and he was finally able to see over their heads. The aircraft was enormous, absolutely gigantic, the size of a stadium with aisles stretching its entirety. There were thousands of passengers on the flight, unseated and milling about with confusion, and the cause of the chaos was something mixed in with them.

There were men, and women, and children, and they suddenly ran in different directions, most of them toward the back of the plane. Then the floor broke apart, except for the main aisle, and fell away all around him, and thousands of passengers fell with it. When he looked down at his surroundings again, there were no other seats except in his row. The rest of the plane, or whatever type of aircraft it actually was, looked to be shaped like

a giant bowl. Below him and out of sight, it sounded like the humans were being fed upon. The vessel was a slaughter.

He looked ahead and saw a mass of unstoppable death in the distance. There were so many of what he feared that it looked as if every human on earth had molted except for him and the few thousand others who were on the flight. Far too many to count, a moving sea of predators that could cover the entire planet, and each one was trying to get ahold of the few remaining humans. They ran for their lives and screamed, climbed over dark obstacles in the distance that he couldn't see clearly—probably the seats that had fallen away—and also over one another in desperation to survive.

"Jonah."

It sounded like the voice was behind him. He tried to answer but found he couldn't say a word, and he was also unable to turn away from what was before him. He was transfixed, but it was also as if his head couldn't move. All he could do was struggle to speak one drawn-out word that he was unable to finish. Then he found his voice, but that became a groan of despair as he saw that the slaughter before him, though far away, was edging closer. He tried to turn and run away like the others before they'd fallen out of sight, down the aisle toward the back of the massive aircraft, but he found he couldn't move again.

Glancing down he saw why; there were multiple seatbelts tied around him now, on his arms and his wrists and even his legs and from both sides of the only aisle. Trying desperately to turn his head to at least see who had spoken to him, he twisted far enough to realize there was no one there, and when he turned back again, he was alone. There was no one else on the cold metal aisle but him, not even the flight attendants, and now there was a jagged drop-off at the end of the aisle as if the metal had been torn off. Shredding sounds and screams came from a place he could not see.

The rest of the people who were still alive were beyond where the drop-off ended. He caught glimpses of the massive bowl-like structure filled with the dying, and each person could only wait for their turn to die. The howling, growling, and snarling were deafening.

The blood of hundreds of thousands, maybe even millions, became so deep that the world was now an ocean of red, and its depth was rising by the second. Then everything, the people and the Molters, disappeared under its frothy red surface. The aisle he lay on was the last remaining sturdy ground. He could still hear screaming under the blood, but it was garbled.

"Jonah."

That was the voice. The exact one he'd heard before. He wasn't by himself after all. How did she know him? He was on the flight, and she must have been able to access that information through their computer system somehow. Strangely, with everything going on in front of him, she sounded very calm, but how could she be that way?

He made another desperate attempt to twist toward the woman saying his

name, look behind him in the other direction, but again found it pointless. The seatbelts lassoed every part of him, even his head, covering his mouth and steadily getting tighter, and now they were slowly dragging him toward the drop-off. The sea of briny, churning red rose and fell and moved with violent waves as if there were a storm.

Thunder and lightning boomed all around him, and the wind blew red droplets all over him. The heat of it was so warm it was as if he were taking a hot shower. He struggled and yelled and pulled against the bonds that held him and dragged him toward the edge, closer to the bloody hell storm that the world had become.

The blood waves crashed where the aisle ended, where it had been sheared off. He tried to say something, to ask anyone to help him, but he couldn't. The machete he used earlier had disappeared. There was nothing else he could do except wait to be submerged and for death to take him too.

"Jonah, wake up."

The voice was familiar, but he didn't know who she was. It was as if she were someone he'd known a long time ago. Then he heard another familiar sound, one he knew all too well. It was the sound *they* made when they were about to attack, an eager anticipation that meant their hunger was about to be relieved.

Although desperate to tear his view away from the dreadfulness advancing on him, he found he could do nothing. All he could do was watch as a Molter emerged from the ocean of blood, getting a grip on the jagged edge of the aisle, and haul itself up with a splash. It had multiple limbs like a Behemoth and dozens of eyes.

When it saw him, it reached for him, stretching as it did, its many eyes glowing and its oversize, sharp, jagged teeth dripping with blood. Then it leaped on top of him, and its claws sank into his back to hold him in place. He felt its hot breath on his neck.

A scream belted out of him through crushed lips. He knew he was seconds away from feeling it bite into his flesh and would feel what it was like to be drained of the precious fluid that kept him alive like the millions of other humans who had already died.

"Wake up."

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CHAPTER 15

Muffled voices. Almost like English backward until he realized he was coming out of a slumber, his consciousness rapidly swimming toward the surface where everything would make sense.

"He's fine," Doreen whispered. "Go back to bed."

"OK," Heike said.

Doreen caressed Jonah's shoulder and kissed the back of his neck. "You're all right."

Instant relief is what he felt, being teleported into his woman's embrace, her love, her care. But that didn't prevent him from remembering. "Damn. That one was . . ."

"Just a dream."

"So real. But not at all. Felt that way, though."

"You're safe."

"It meant something." *Hopefully not the immediate future. Give us a few more good years.*

"If you want to talk about it . . ."

"I woke you and Heike."

"It's OK. Doesn't take much noise to do that around here."

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to."

"I know you didn't. Not your fault."

"I didn't scare her, did I?"

"She was just concerned."

"I'm fine, Jonah," Heike yell-whispered from her room.

Doreen snickered, and Jonah couldn't help but laugh. Doreen climbed out of bed, slowly and carefully, as if Jonah were still asleep. It was funny how nighttime made everybody creep around like would-be burglars.

Doreen cupped a hand to the side of her mouth and whispered, "Go back to sleep."

"I'm trying," Heike said from her room.

Doreen closed their bedroom door and got back in bed in the exact same spot she had been in when Jonah woke up, behind him. She held him again.

"I must have said things?"

"You did."

"Could you understand any of it?"

"No."

"Did I . . . yell?"

"Your mouth was closed, but it sounded like you were trying to say something, but you couldn't."

I was screaming. But he didn't tell her that. Like she said, just a dream. Dreams couldn't hurt him. They never did. This had been a nightmare,

though, and like others he'd endured, he suspected they'd begun to take their toll, affecting his behavior when he was awake. Maybe that was the purpose of dreams.

He was so thankful it hadn't been real and exhaled as if he were attempting to rid himself of it. He was feeling better as each second passed. Calmer. To go from hell to loving warmth almost made the horror of it vanish from his mind completely. But residue remained in the corners of his mind like pesky cobwebs.

Why do I dream so much? And when I do, why is it always awful?

Maybe those were the only ones he remembered. "Must be stress," he found himself saying, and hearing his conviction was comforting somehow, as was relishing being close to his woman in the soft, cozy perfectness that was the sanctuary of their small bed. "I hate that I woke you both up but especially her."

"She wakes up during the night sometimes. You know that. Not a big deal. She's fine. And we've accepted what you go through. Sometimes. Like tonight. Every once in a while."

"But so many times that you've had to have a discussion about it obviously. I'm sorry about that."

"You don't have to be sorry. What was the dream about?"

"I don't want to talk about it," he said in a such a deep, sleepy voice that he realized he was still very tired. If he did get more sleep, he hoped it would be peaceful.

"Maybe if you do, it will help so you don't have bad dreams so much."

She was probably right. And it was only a dream, but he felt like there was a lot of truth in it, too, a metaphor for what was actually happening in the rest of the world. "I hate it when I wake you."

"Tell me, please. You have bad dreams too much. Don't be nervous. I won't think any less of you. Even the mighty Jonah can be vulnerable. Especially around me."

"*Mighty*, huh?"

"Mm-hmm. I want to help you understand why. You were a veteran even before the Molting. You've been a soldier for many years."

"So have you."

"I didn't go to war. You did."

"You shouldn't disregard your service. Just because you weren't deployed doesn't mean you didn't serve your country."

"I'm not disregarding it, but I avoided the trauma that many soldiers experience in a war theater, and you are trying to change the subject."

"I just don't want to . . . I'm uncomfortable with dumping my garbage on you. I avoid it if I can help it."

"Yes, you do, and I appreciate that, but I can handle it. I've been handling it. This isn't the first time—"

"I hate that."

"I know, but I love you, and I'm here for you when you need me. You have lots of garbage, probably more than you realize, but your garbage is mine sometimes, just as mine is yours on occasion, and neither of us minds helping the other clean things up every once in a while. Now, tell me."

"I love you too." Jonah exhaled. "I was on a plane."

"An airplane or another dimension?"

"Practically. No, an airplane but not a regular one. It was this giant aircraft the size of a football stadium, or two, or, no, bigger, and it was weird because it was like it was as big as Earth, but it was flying."

"It had big wings too?"

Jonah cleared his throat. "Actually I don't remember it having wings. I just knew it was an airplane."

"Hmm. Dreams can be so strange."

"Oh, it gets stranger. The plane was filled with . . ."

"With what?"

"With the last people alive. Running and screaming trying to get away from . . . *them*. Them and . . . blood. So much, it was as deep as the ocean. There were even waves."

"Maybe that part was because we've been talking about beaches so much lately? I hear you dream what you think about."

"Yeah, maybe but . . . no. That's not why. It . . . there was meaning."

"It sounds awful. How often do you dream about *them*?"

"A lot. I just wish I didn't remember."

"With everything you've been through, what we've all been through . . . I'm just glad you aren't alone."

He rolled over onto his back and tucked his arm beneath her, hugging her close. "Me too."

Doreen spoke into his chest. "As long as I'm alive, you never will be."

And that, quite simply, was why they were together. Jonah felt the same way as she did, but he didn't know what else to say. All he wanted to do was lie there and be comforted while he was vulnerable. Jonah was who he was while he was awake, and some would consider him a warrior, but at night, when he was asleep, he was just like everybody else and susceptible to the stress caused by what threatened them every day. Unfortunately Jonah was only human.

The Molting had absolutely devastated humanity and would likely be the end for the species and probably affected the rest of the life on the planet, except for what swam in the ocean—it might even protect marine life—but it had brought Jonah to Doreen. He would have never met her otherwise. Even under the direst circumstances, people could still find each other, as he and Doreen had.

Do not discount the resiliency of human beings.

Sven, the doctor at Henrytown, had told him that. Jonah couldn't agree more. That was when he heard something familiar. It sounded very far away

but still got his heart racing.

"Doreen . . . Do you hear that?"

"Hear what?"

Jonah rose up. "That."

Suddenly, outside the cabin, somewhere above in the sky, there was an explosion of sound, and it sounded like an engine. For a brief moment, he considered grabbing one of the loaded flare guns but thought better of it. He had to make sure he wasn't mistaken, which wasn't likely, considering his military background. Whatever it was out there, it could be a symbol of civilization, that there still was one, and as it had been, but it could also mean so much more.

"Where are you going?" she said.

He was already up and getting dressed. "No wonder I was dreaming about an airplane."

"That's a flight I never want to be on."

Jonah loved the joke and chuckled. It was just what he needed to hear. He grabbed his 9mm off the dresser and was quickly outside.

Peering up at the night sky, he saw only dark clouds, and even though he was barefoot and standing in the snow, he was warm. It had gotten so much warmer. Even from the day before. What he heard while inside the cabin was gone apparently, and what he expected to see, and was hoping to, wasn't there anymore.

He still stood there for a while listening anyway, searching the clouds, hoping he would spot an aircraft of some sort, thinking about what it could mean if he saw the blinking red lights of a plane so high up it wouldn't be possible to see clearly during the day, as he'd done throughout his life.

When he was young, he would hear the sound of an engine only to find that the aircraft responsible was well ahead of where it sounded like it was due to its speed, leaving a long, cloudy trail of exhaust gases behind it. The memory brought him back twenty years, when he had been just a normal kid during normal times.

Just as he had then, naively, he hoped to hear even the slightest distinctive echo, as he thought he had while lying in bed. If he saw anything close to what he hoped, then it meant that moving was actually possible. They could not just move; they could also resume life as they knew it.

Instead he was slowly pelted with light raindrops. It had only been wishful thinking. He'd made a mistake but only because of his optimism. Even he was subject to mistaken identity as he had just awoken from tumultuous sleep, something that—according to Doreen—happened often. Lightning spit across the sky then, and thunder cracked, then rolled, diminishing miles away into a powerful echo, sounding very much like the aircraft he'd mistaken it for.

More rain droplets, fat ones, plopped on top of his head, and the area around the cabin, his territory, was suddenly immersed in a very powerful rainstorm. Lightning tendrils flashed and reached, disappearing instantly,

briefly illuminating shadowy mountaintops in the distance, and then thunder took its place as if it were the one in charge of the sky.

Doreen leaned out the door. “It’s just a storm.”

“I know.”

“Did you think it was an airplane?”

“Yes,” he said, as rain droplets drenched his hair and streaked down his forehead and cheeks, absorbing into his beard.

“Come inside. You’re getting soaked.”

He walked onto the porch but turned back, staring out at the surrounding forest.

“What’s got you spooked?”

Jonah turned to her. “There’s something I have to do.”

“The sun will rise in a few hours. Come lie down with me.”

He wiped the wet from his beard. “All right.”

Then he followed her inside, closed the door behind him, and locked it.

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CHAPTER 16

There was something in there he'd missed. Ever since he'd left, a mysterious blip kept popping up on his radar. What was confusing was he was aware of everything that was inside. He couldn't shake it, which was why he was going back. Giving the cave another look. Maybe it was nothing, but he suspected something was in there that might answer a question or two. Or it might be a wasted effort. Either way at least he would know and then could put it behind him.

Even though the weather seemed like it was getting warmer every day, he told Doreen what she needed to do in case there was another snowfall. There likely would be. Heike had made many last snowmen during the previous winter. The temperature would undoubtedly rise and fall, but there probably would be another blizzard or two, given it had practically been winter since their arrival almost two years ago, and if there were another storm, the opening to the cave might be buried as it had been before. He needed to examine it once more before that happened.

His people would stay put, be heavily armed, and wait for his return. They knew where he was going, so his whereabouts weren't an issue, especially after Doreen reminded him to take a radio. That wasn't all the new equipment he was bringing along. He wasn't going to be caught off guard again like he had been before going down the hill behind the cabin. He was heading out ready for battle, maintaining that mind-set, as he always should.

Other than the pistol in its holster under his arm, he also slung an automatic rifle and carried a shotgun. Both were equipped with silencers, and he could always attach the one to his pistol if he needed to. His black backpack was half-full of shotgun shells and loaded magazines.

Although Doreen had attempted to talk him out of spontaneous missions in the past, she didn't do it this time. She understood there was no stopping him when something nagged at his mind because she also knew, as he did, it wouldn't go away until he figured it out and most of the time it benefited them. When he'd first begun doing that—going on spontaneous missions—she'd thought it was because of cabin fever. She understood him better now.

Before Jonah left, he did a radio check, kissed Doreen, and told Heike to be good. She was intensely playing one of her many games. He noticed she was making the moves of other players, too, but in a way that made it seem as if she were pretending to be someone else—as if her other moves were by a playmate.

The cave was wide open. On his way out the last time, he'd done a thorough

job of digging through the debris that had fallen. Turning on the flashlight he'd taped to the silencer-equipped shotgun, he painted the walls with it.

What am I missing?

Besides the stench of rotting Molters, nothing jumped out at him—thankfully literally—but he was hoping an answer would. Something as obvious as a painted message on one of the rock walls, like the message back at the military base in Oberstein, the one that had first warned them about the Molters and Behemoths. He was thankful to whoever had done that. They had been selfless.

It was only a feeling, but his gut was telling him that the Molters had evolved substantially. With the different strains, it was possible there were many more things about them that had changed also. As of right now, he was unaware of what that may be. It was why he was in there.

Upon closer inspection—he wasn't so anxious to leave as before—the walls were still frozen, coated with thick ice, and some of it was so deep that it looked a light blue due to its depth. It was almost beautiful the way it distorted images, like art.

Out of nowhere he felt the throb of a familiar headache. His last cup of coffee had been from early in the morning the day before, when he took Heike out hunting. He would need to make some when he got back, or he could radio Doreen when he was on his way. No reason to wait on it, though.

Jonah switched on the radio. "Base, this is One."

He waited. One was his call sign when he was out on his own, and Two was for when he and Heike were out together.

"Go ahead, One."

"Will you put on some coffee?"

"Sure. Anything else?"

"Not right now, thanks."

"OK. Nice to hear your voice."

"Yours too. Love you."

"Love you too. Over and out."

Lately he wondered if coffee was the cause of his nightmares, if drinking it throughout the day was the culprit. Even if it was, it was worth it. He was addicted to caffeine, but he didn't care because he'd kicked his worst habits; he was sober, hadn't had a drink in years except for that one time he'd screwed up, didn't do drugs anymore, and he didn't smoke cigarettes either. That energy needed to go somewhere so coffee was the perfect vice.

There weren't any more Molters alive that he could see, just the corpses of the ones he'd already killed. They had fallen onto the ground. Instead of shining the light toward the rear of the cave and heading there immediately as he had the other day, he walked the entirety of it more closely, carefully examining the ground and the sleeping bags and chairs that had been moved in there for mysterious reasons.

He wondered, *With the cabin so close, why did people choose to be in*

here? There were better places to live or even hide. It was as if whoever called this place home had expected to die. He could only guess. One reason could be—similar to when Daisy had molted, before anyone understood the Molter's lifecycle—that they were quarantining someone who was unconscious and expected to molt. That way they could keep the others—who likely lived at the cabin—safe. The more he thought about it, the more that made sense.

Inside the boxes he'd meant to go through, he found a few board games, ones Heike already owned, so he wouldn't bring them back with him, but it was an answer to a question; it meant there had been at least one child kept in there. He hoped it hadn't been the child who had molted, which was a strange thought. So many children had been killed, fed upon, or had molted themselves, that it wasn't rare, but no one liked the idea of a child suffering.

Chills suddenly ran up his spine, and it wasn't because of the temperature. What a terrible end for anyone, especially a child, whether he or she molted or was fed upon. When humans were without proper weapons to defend themselves, one Molter could feed on as many humans as it could sink its teeth into. Their predatory instinct to feed and kill was the dominant one. With all Jonah knew, he still couldn't make sense of why the Molters had remained hidden in the cave. It wasn't as if others were afraid of dipping their clawed feet in the snow.

Unless . . .

Jonah hoped he was wrong about his latest hypothesis, but how often was he mistaken? Exhaling and getting mentally ready, he walked back over to the corpses. He set the shotgun and automatic rifle butts down and leaned them against the cave wall, then reached to his waist, unsnapped the clasp that held his machete securely in its sheath, and pulled it free.

Kneeling, he stabbed into the torso of the nearest corpse, the Molter that looked different than the others with its green skin and teeth sprouting all around its mouth, and sawed it open. The flesh was frozen but hardly any trouble for a sharpened machete or the strength of a determined wielder. The stench of death emanated even more with it cut open, distinct from the human it had been born from but still potent enough that Jonah wasn't quite ready for it.

Removing his gloves and sinking his fingers inside, the temperature of his hands immediately changed the density of the flesh, from icy to the beginnings of warmth, causing it to be more pliable. Ignoring the sudden surge of nausea that stung the depth of his stomach, causing him to want to turn his head and wretch, he firmly grasped both sides of the gash and pried it open.

"Fuckin' hell."

There had been no reason to stay after that. Not after what he'd discovered. What he had been dreading. Along with that came the answers he was looking for. As he made his way home, he thought about what it all meant.

Except he needed to start at the beginning, when they first arrived at the cabin—similar to when he studied the growth of the Behemoth cocoon and learned they could form out of thin air—because today he learned something about the enemy that was even more frightening.

Behemoths would have dominated the territory if he weren't so thorough about killing them as soon as they started to mature in their cocoons. He also knew that even if he didn't follow through with his exterminations, some Behemoths would die naturally, from age, whatever happened to them after spreading to other territories, or fights with one another. Jonah had seen what happened when Behemoths confronted each other; they fought to the death. It was basic survival.

What Jonah accomplished was a contingency in case those things didn't occur. That way a Behemoth wouldn't have the opportunity to pry open their rooftop. When he'd first begun destroying the cocoons, he'd used rocket launchers. It was the easiest way. It wasn't as if they were a moving target. It was also his favorite method because it satisfied the part of his male brain that was delighted by explosions and also the part that confused most women.

Except that had been before he realized how many of them actually formed and because most of the rocket launchers were the one-shot, fire-and-forget kind, and when Behemoth cocoons had kept forming, he'd selected the most effective method—rifle shot from a distance—and saved the rockets for more appropriate trouble. Still, whenever he saw a rocket launcher, he considered it a future Behemoth kill.

With multiple gunshots to the tops of the cocoons, he discovered, it would eventually fall and the impact would kill the maturing Behemoth. Back then, before he accomplished it all from the ridges and with his high-powered bolt-action rifle, he would find and douse the cocoons with fuel and burn them up on the ground just to be sure. The Behemoth within would never be born, and the slimy Infectors died easily at that stage in their development. Their bodies were still forming and very delicate. Fire practically melted them, similar to pouring hot, steaming water over ice cubes.

Close-quarters extermination took up too much of his day, though. Had he continued to destroy them by that method, he would have had to have been out all day and night, every day and night. Eventually he'd settled on killing them from a distance. He had plenty of bullets for his many rifles. One shot, one kill, and if he happened to miss—which he rarely did—then that second shot would do the job if the cocoon was still growing later.

On rare occasions he needed to squeeze the trigger a third time, but he was a damn good shot. Not the greatest. He'd met a few fellow soldiers who qualified for that description when he'd served, and he wasn't as good as them but good enough to deserve an M-K or B-K tattoo. Maybe he'd get both

tattoos one day.

Jonah's interference in the enemy population was inconsequential in relation to elsewhere. He was sure of it. The only place he affected was the territory surrounding the cabin. Except deep down he also knew that what he was capable of was rare because there were only so many people alive and only so many men and women like him: well trained, painstakingly meticulous, and armed to the teeth.

That meant there was a high probability that Molters dominated the planet. A hard truth but their lifecycle ensured it. They were born by killing humans, so it was better just to accept it. That way he could be ready for anything thrown at them. And one of the facts was there was still much about them that he didn't know. In all likelihood he would never learn it all, even though he needed to. Remembering that would keep them safer.

The green one in the cave had been different than the others and wasn't of the same strain he'd faced years ago at Oberstein, a few years later in Henrytown, or even days ago down the slope from the cabin. It was unusual. Even when he'd first seen it hanging there, he'd known there was something different about it. Perhaps it was its shape or size or perhaps it possessed a trait so imperceptible that it was practically invisible and only his subconscious had recognized it as unlike the others. He couldn't be sure, but it'd just seemed enhanced. Streamlined. Better.

The obvious differences were its teeth placement—all around its mouth, like a sea anemone with teeth—and its skin color. That was probably why Jonah had decided to cut into it first. Just as no human was exactly the same—even identical twins were distinct in many ways—and there were different races, when it came to the animal kingdom, there were similarities in the behaviors of beasts but differences in appearances. Molters grew as they fed, and their eyes were sometimes different sizes, but they all seemed to be the same on the inside.

Unless it was a Behemoth bomb, which Jonah had never encountered—Sven had claimed he had—or an Infector bomb.

After cutting open the second two, Jonah panicked because he'd discovered the same thing; there were Infectors inside all of them. All three were Infector bombs, even though they were different in appearance. Jonah had made sure there was nothing else to be discovered—except unrecognizable organs—by cutting even deeper and had pulled the small creatures from cold, gooey sacs of fluid to see that they were frozen and dead. They were slightly underdeveloped and not moving, but he still used his boot heels to make sure.

During the battle of Henrytown, Jonah had killed over thirty Infectors, all trying to get to Heike, which likely meant other Infector bombs had exploded out of sight, sending many Infectors scurrying ahead like the first wave of an attack. Infector bombs had hardly existed before Henrytown as far as Jonah knew, but as he'd learned from those events, Molters could adapt, change, and

also, apparently, evolve.

Maybe the ones in the cave had gotten trapped and had had no choice but to hibernate to survive. No, Jonah thought. If anything, they were waiting in a safe hiding place until the Infectors matured enough to be born. It wouldn't have been a coincidence. Then the Molters would have clawed themselves out to search for humans and, when they did, violently split open to spew forth all the spindly creatures living inside them. That likely would have happened at the cabin.

Jonah was thankful he'd discovered the cave, eliminated the threats, and learned what had been nagging his subconscious. He'd been correct to think there was a secret in there. Those Molters hadn't been newborns. They'd been alive for a while, which meant they should have cocooned themselves to become a meal for a Behemoth, but they hadn't. They'd been born as Infector bombs. It meant Infector bombs were independent from Behemoths.

The more he thought about it, the more it made sense that Infector bombs were the next stage in Molter evolution, and the main proof was some that were bombs having a different appearance. If Jonah were to guess, he suspected the green Molters were born only from humans bitten by Infectors birthed by an Infector bomb, which would mean there were different strains of Infectors too. But most importantly complete independence from a Behemoth. He wondered if Infector bombs had ever served Behemoths at all. That would mean that the Molters had been evolving since the Molting began.

The fact that Behemoths secreted Infectors after the stingers in their tails could no longer infect a potential host might be irrelevant. That didn't mean that the Molters those particular Infectors created would serve a Behemoth. It was possible that Behemoths were not meant to be dominant. They'd only begun the Molting and had already served their purpose. Their job was done. Jonah let that sink in.

Animals that didn't need each other were often enemies because they were competition. There being three Molters together also concerned him. It was another example of them acting as a pack but one without a Behemoth to serve. All were capable of killing, and all were also capable of birthing many more that could infect humans. No Behemoth meant Molters weren't tethered to a confined territory. They were free to hunt wherever their clawed feet could take them, which explained how some could just show up at the cabin out of nowhere like the ones Jonah had recently killed. They were proof of that.

The threat of the Molting was an attack on humanity but with the efficiency of a military by air or land—Behemoths formed out of thin air, and that could likely happen anywhere. And if each Molter, the Molters that were Infector bombs, was capable of producing a dozen or so Infectors—some more, some less—and a human was required as the vessel to mutate into a newborn Molter, then it was only a matter of time before humanity would be extinct.

We'll just see about that, Jonah thought as he trudged home through the

melting snow.

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CHAPTER 17

"You going to answer me?" he said again, no longer holding back his irritation.

He was being ignored, had been since he had been brought in to this particular tent. Archard had finally agreed to speak with him, but that had taken many conversations with his subordinates and weeks to work out. So far Archard hadn't even sipped the coffee he'd just poured for himself. It was as if he thought himself the most important man on the planet and that speaking to someone such as him was beneath him. The bold aroma from the coffeepot emanated just out of view.

Archard's back was to him. "What was the question?"

About time. "You're obviously keeping me alive for a reason," he said, scratching at his long, thick beard, one that would grow back within days if he were allowed to shave. "What's in it for you?"

"Nothing. It's about what you do for the others."

"I ain't doing nothing of importance in this cell. Or any of the others."

Archard's posture straightened, and he turned. "You are, though. When they see you in there, they know it could be them."

"You've killed everyone I know."

"No, Molters did."

"All you're doing is putting the fear into your own."

"Not all of your people are dead."

"No, just the ones I cared about. The hell with those Americans."

A slight smirk cornered Archard's mouth. "Their perception of what is happening to you keeps them afraid, and that keeps them productive."

"And what if I cut my throat?"

Archard took a long sip of his coffee from the metal cup, the steam rising up his face as if the drink were three hundred degrees. "Will you?"

Let him think about it, he thought. Archard wore green fatigues, and they looked as if they had been pressed that morning, which he supposed was possible. He had mentioned he'd been in the military but wouldn't say for which country, and his uniform gave no hint. Archard seemed to wear the same green fatigues every day and likely had multiple articles of the same clothing. The way Archard dressed reminded him of his father when he was a boy, how he'd worn a similar uniform before heading out on a field exercise.

But Archard was nothing like the man his father had been. He'd been a good man, an upstanding citizen who had served his country honorably, and that couldn't be said for Archard, the maniac currently in charge of all this. He acted like an officer, though, or thought himself to be, and he was always clean shaven. He had a cleft chin with sharp features and deep-set eyes under thick black eyebrows. In contrast he had gray hair. The way he looked at

people was how most considered a bug before squashing it.

"You would do that?" Archard said, studying him for a response. "Kill yourself?"

"To take away your power."

"Impossible."

"Some of your control then, to allow others to escape."

Archard offered him the cockiest smile he'd ever seen. "To where? There's nowhere they could go that's safer than here."

I hope you're wrong. "You don't know that."

"Yes, I do. I'm doing all of you a service. Without me you'd all be dead already," Archard said and took another sip of his coffee, unblinking.

Archard actually believed what he was saying. "Dying out there, *out there*, is better than ending up like the others," he said.

"It all comes down to the simplest of things, doesn't it?" Archard must have decided his cup wasn't hot enough because he went back and topped it off with another pour. He raised it to his nose and inhaled deeply. "Delicious. Want some?"

Of course he did. "No."

"You could have everything I offer. All you have to do is be a yes man. Like the others." Archard waited, as if just a cup of coffee would be enough to change his mind. "Suit yourself. Without this"—he raised the cup—"I'd definitely turn into a brute."

His whiff of the coffee actually made his belly rumble with hunger as if it were food. Well, for some, like himself, it practically had been before the Molting. "*Turn?* I think you're there already."

The steam from the drink cascaded up Archard's face, making him look like a demon immersed in smoke. Archard grabbed a foldout chair and sat in front of the cell. "A man your age probably has a kid or two. Adults by now. Got any adults?"

"Only a man who has no children would think a parent would betray them."

"I'll take that as a yes."

"What do you really want? Why did you finally agree to meet with me?"

Archard's expression gave away nothing. "Some here look up to you."

"I already told you—"

"I kill you, and they'll panic, try to escape. We need them all. Everyone who is alive with two good hands or even one that can aim a weapon. You're the type of man who is a leader. You inspire, and you are of better use alive than dead. Keeps the rest from doing something stupid. Or delays it. I'm not promising you you'll live much longer, but you will definitely extend some lives."

"There's another reason, and I bet I can guess."

Archard smirked. "Go ahead."

"More."

"What?"

"More. You think I come from a place where there are treasure chests filled with whatever you believe is important." *Probably weapons.* "You think I'm the only one who knows where it all is and that I'll eventually talk."

"Will you?"

"You haven't been paying attention."

Archard stood and dumped the rest of his coffee to the side with a splat. The puddle steamed. "You're serving a purpose, for now, but that won't last, unless you and the people you care about simply tell me—"

"You're wasting your time. You should just do to me what you've done to the others. I've known men like you before."

"Enlighten me."

He approached the cage mesh, towering over Archard at six feet five inches. "You're the paranoid type. You think I'm going to organize and take you down."

"Will you?"

"Is that your favorite question?" he said, like an annoyed father. He couldn't help it. "That couldn't be further from the truth."

"And what is the truth?"

"All I want is to get as far away from you and all your fucked-up people as possible."

"You don't just mean you. You're referring to yourself and those who you claim not to care about anymore. And right into the warm embrace of what fucked us up in the first place. Even if you left today, you'd be dead tomorrow. There's no escaping them."

"I'll take my chances."

"You don't understand. Your life is mine. The only reason you're still alive is because of me, so I'll do with you as I wish."

"I've endured worse than you."

"The only thing worse than me would take you to the ground and feed on you."

"That already happened, and I'm still alive."

"Bullshit."

"It's true. I can drop my pants and show you the scar on my upper leg if you want."

"Keep pushing me, and everyone will see how tough you really are."

"You would have put me out in the open already if that was your plan, which it isn't, and that's because you aren't man enough to rule on your own."

Archard reddened. "Attempting to anger me will only—"

One of his men opened the flap to the large tent. "Sir?"

Archard's unreadable expression returned, and he calmly addressed the newcomer. "What is it?"

"If I'm interrupting . . ."

"Go ahead."

“Frox and Perry are here. They have the lists for the volunteers willing to go out searching.”

“Good, good. Tell them I’ll be there in three minutes.”

“Yes, sir,” he said and allowed the flap of the tent to fall closed.

“You have good instincts. I do want to know where your possessions are. I know you have family out there somewhere. There’s no other reason for you to be in this country.”

“I was on vacation.”

“I’m sure they’re wondering where you are. No man strays from base with the minimal amount of gear you had. You were not planning on going far when you were caught. They’re close. I know it, and we’re going to find them. Take what’s there and kill them. That’ll be on you. Unless you change your mind, of course.”

Archard was making mistakes. The biggest was keeping another leader around. If he wanted to maintain his power and keep control, he should surround himself with only subordinates. The man he was keeping in the cell most definitely was not that. Archard turned and marched away from him.

“Archard . . . Hey, asshole!”

Archard held the flap to the tent open, maintaining his mechanical composure.

“You’d better hope I never get out of here.”

“You won’t, Henry,” Archard said and exited the tent.

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MOLTERPOCALYPSE

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CHAPTER 1

Wind found its way through the woods far more easily than in previous months, exploring, naturally testing boundaries, doing its best to worm wherever it could, intent on bringing the strength and denseness of the trees to the ground for primitive reasoning. The wind blew against him, too, with powerful blustery gusts, but he could also hear it in the distance, a blind brute angry that it was unable to go wherever it wished whenever it wished, howling its frustration. Although there was still snow, it was melting, and the many drips coming off branches almost looked like a slow rain.

Radio contact had already been established. Doreen knew his location and was keeping her radio on. She was also ready to defend herself and Heike while he was away. Jonah had convinced her to keep her snub-nose revolver in a holster on the coat rack next to the door. Easy access to a weapon when he wasn't home. Heike respected weapons, was comfortable around them, and wouldn't mess with it or the rocket launcher. Heike carried her own pistol now anyway.

Doreen had told him something before he went; she'd said not to let his nightmares control his days. Her tone was almost as if she'd cursed by accident. He understood what she meant. She simply longed for everything to be normal, but he couldn't live that way. Couldn't allow any of them to. Not yet. His fears kept them alive. That was a fact. He knew what his nightmares meant—especially the worst one with the ocean of blood. He was well aware of the power of the subconscious. Every now and then, it pushed forward muddled—but accurate—information, often wrapped in a layer of confusion until it was deciphered.

Jonah's subconscious had been doing its best to show him his worst fear and for good reason because there was truth in the creature that emerged from all that briny blood, the one that had looked to be part Molter and part Behemoth at the same time. Even though the nightmare had been months ago he still thought of it often. It had meant the creatures were evolving, changing, and also that humans were on the brink of extinction.

Although that was undoubtedly true, or would be soon, it wouldn't happen to *his* people as long as there was blood in Jonah's veins. And he was sure he wasn't the only one who felt that way. People didn't relent easily. Or quietly. Most had a lot of fight in them, and most of them weren't even aware of what they were capable of until it was time to act.

Wearing NVGs allowed him to stalk them because they were so close. He wasn't sure how they had slipped through his regimented clearing. Probably related to his latest hypotheses, how they'd evolved and no longer served a Behemoth, but it didn't matter how exactly they had gotten through. They had. Molters didn't hunt as much while there was snow on the ground, so

whenever winter began its slide toward spring, they were far more active. Their appearing wasn't exactly a shock. He just didn't know which direction they had come from. He wished it was possible for a study to be done so their behavior would be more predictable.

At least he always knew where to aim his weapon: at the enemy. The trap he'd set wasn't exactly that—more like a lure to get them to where he wanted them to go, to open ground, which was difficult to find in this forest. Molters stuck close to trees whenever possible, or below branches where bushes were often thickest, and there were plenty of both in a Bavarian forest. Molters did their best to remain invisible, preferably above and hidden while hunting, and usually only went to ground to kill.

When they were on the ground, they were often in packs, so some had likely hunted together for a lengthy period of time, which, for them, was probably weeks or months or possibly even years. For so long, they were still alive. Some were still undoubtedly the old strain, so they wouldn't cocoon until they'd drunk enough blood. Until that happened, they would continue to hunt. Lately, though, Jonah had suspected the new strain, the ones with green skin that were Infector bombs, dominated because he hadn't seen any Behemoth food, the cocoons—Molters that had fed enough to turn into those cocoons and liquefied their insides—for at least a year. The new strain likely kept on feeding until the Infectors inside them matured. Once that happened, the Molters themselves burst open to unleash Infectors upon the world.

Regardless of their evolution and Jonah's inability to completely understand their behavior, for today, being able to rely on the inquisitiveness of the Molters made them killable. No matter how diligent he was, it was as if they knew about the cabin somehow, and they kept edging closer. Compared to the denseness of the forest surrounding it, the cabin was practically out in the open. Jonah had spotted far too many of them lately—even for spring numbers—and even though he mostly kept them away, the mission he was currently on was a necessary one. He had waited until nightfall to string up the carcass.

The deer had been an afterthought. He already had a dead rabbit, which they later ate, one of the big ones like the first one that Heike had shot, and he had been planning to use it the same way he had decided to use the deer corpse. Except he wanted a meal the creatures would find more appetizing—more visible, too—and one large enough for them all to sink their teeth into. Only now it was getting to the point where there were too many of them to keep an eye on.

His plan had to wait until he was able to kill the deer, which was difficult with them being so rare, but thankfully not so rare with winter—technically—ending and the beginnings of spring starting. Spring according to the calendar Doreen had drawn, but not the actual weather. Jonah hadn't wanted to risk the loud report from a bolt-action rifle or be slowed down by the cumbersomeness of even a silenced automatic rifle, so he'd killed the deer with his silenced

9mm pistol, which had initially delayed his plan. There were quite a few nights before he downed the animal when he couldn't make the shot.

Because the first stage of his plan required the use of a pistol, he had to be close as he tracked it and especially patient before squeezing the trigger. Luckily, he was able to take the deer as it was behind some trees, oblivious to his proximity, and it was a shot in the eye that put it down as it trotted toward him unaware. Like many animals, it had probably never seen a person before. Although he hated to kill it and waste the meat—he wasn't about to eat it after the Molters were done with it—it was being used to protect his people.

He had raised the feet up by rope so its neck was at biting level, impossible for them to resist a bite, or at least ensuring a cautious inspection. The only problem was that its blood continued to leak out of the hole in its eye. He considered leaving the dead deer on the ground but while tied up in the air it moved around a little. Falsely, and pushed around by the wind and the sway of its dead weight from the branch, but to them he hoped it looked as if it were still alive.

The open ground he aimed at was just over a hill. He positioned himself atop of it but was still out of their view. He wasn't sure how long that would last, and he had no choice but to wait before moving forward. Even though he was ready for them, he was surprised when the first of them appeared—where he wanted it to go. It had moved very quickly. It was as if there was nothing he could see, and then there it was, as if it had materialized out of thin air. The creature was hunched, uncertain of the possible danger of its surroundings, and menacing.

They always look that way.

Exposed and in Jonah's watchful view, it was still half in the tree line, at the base of long, wavy shadows. He was in perfect firing position if he wanted to take it out now, but he wanted to kill them all and also be closer to ensure success. If he started shooting from up the slope, they would scatter, and all of his preparation would have been for nothing. That deer would have died for nothing, and that would have been unacceptable. He always did his best never to waste anything.

Jonah couldn't very well wait forever though. It wasn't as if he could camp out as a sniper would during a regular war, not with these enemies. They would find the carcass of interest, or they would leave it to hunt elsewhere. The deer had still been warm when he'd strung it up and probably still was, but that wouldn't last long. Not in this cold.

All the creatures swiftly circled the open ground as unexpectedly as the first of them had appeared, as if it had been decided. They were all still cautious and partially out of view, waiting to rush in and feed, as if they understood there was something off with the easy meal before them. He'd seen them attack a live deer before, and that was why he had chosen one for the trap.

The deer, a male, a three-point if Jonah remembered correctly, had been a

single, dipping its muzzle into the snow to nibble on underbrush and grass beneath, and then it was on the ground and covered in Molters, screaming. It had caught Jonah by surprise because he had been hunting it, too, and his focus had been on his aim through the iron sights of his bolt-action rifle. The animal's terror disappeared under all the growling and snarling, and when it went silent, Jonah knew it was dead and close to being completely drained of blood.

If it were anyone else witnessing the present scenery, especially who wasn't an ex-soldier and wearing NVGs, they would likely stroll through the open area thankful for the break of navigating dense forest, only to be as surprised as the male deer that day. Though horrific, Jonah was glad he'd witnessed the attack because it was a reminder, an unvarying one, of what Molters were capable of. How they were always on the hunt or ready to begin one. Plus, it had given him the idea for the lure trap.

Even with all the preparation and knowing what to expect, he was growing more impatient. The Molters were still hesitant, lurking among the trees as if they were keen on the deception somehow. Jonah wondered how long they would wait, or if they would inch closer before turning away or perhaps not even reach the corpse at all.

Maybe he was only afraid nothing was going to happen since he'd put in so much preparation, but they clearly weren't used to seeing immobile prey. They could probably tell the deer was deceased, even though it was a relatively fresh kill. Jonah had never seen them feed on a carcass. He didn't know if they would. The plan might all be for nothing.

As he continued to watch them, he was relieved when one, then another, then all of them advanced toward the dead deer: hunched, arms flexed at their sides, ready to throw their claws at any threat. All their mouths were constantly open, teeth showing. It was as if Molters were half ape, half shark, but perfect for hunting on land.

The first bit the neck, something they always did, but it must have known something was off, registering somewhere in its unsophisticated brain that the blood of the living, what it craved, was much hotter than what it was currently feeding on. Feeding on the dead went against many animals' instincts, and it likely sensed something was wrong the moment it sunk its teeth in. But at that point, it was unable to stop feeding.

They really wanted to hunt, see their prey flee from them so they could chase it down, kill it, and repeat the necessary feeding ritual all over again. Not just be presented with an easy meal. That didn't stop the creature from grasping the head as it drank what blood was left, hanging on to it as if it intended to climb it, and its firm grasp finally yanked the corpse down onto the snow. Jonah had wanted that to happen, so he had not secured the deer very tightly. Then the rest of them covered it like he had seen them do before.

It was a sickening sight of brutality but a familiar one, but not just to Jonah. The feeding was something that had occurred on planet Earth more

times than could possibly be counted, or even known. The first prey was taken down by the first predator a very long time ago, and that built a natural foundation for what had gone on ever since. No doubt it would continue, on this planet and others, and uncountable times in the future. Likely forever.

It didn't mean Jonah would ever get used to it. He hated seeing any defenseless animal die, especially by his own hand, no matter the purpose. But he and his people needed to eat—not this deer, obviously—and hunting was often necessary to make that happen. No matter how it made him feel, he always needed to remember that. Unfortunately, Molters needed to feed too. It was almost time for him to make his move.

Doreen understood Jonah needed to go out during the day to hunt them, but only seldom at night, so there had been no sense in worrying her with specifics. They both knew what needed to be done to keep them safe, and tonight was one of the nights he was out specifically to exterminate them. Even though it was dangerous to be out alone in the dark. One day, there could be thousands covering the mountains. It was why he was doing this. Any chance to decrease their numbers was a necessary outing.

It wasn't possible for Jonah to personally destroy them all, but he would do his best to prevent them from getting close to his people to do what they were presently doing to that carcass. If he had to go out and kill them every night from now on, he would, and not only when his gut told him it needed to be done. There was plenty of daytime for sleep. Even if that meant not getting as much quality time with his loved ones as he preferred. That could always happen more in the future.

Except Jonah was still uncertain whether they could live somewhere else besides the cabin, and even if they did decide on another place, he had no clue where that might be yet. But the decision needed to happen soon, and exploration would definitely be one of his next missions. His wonderings plagued his mind. Somewhere safe, but wasn't that what the cabin was?

Safe, what was safe exactly? Especially considering they were still alive. Judging the state around them and what he knew, forcing a way of life prematurely was a surefire way to end up dead. There were surely plenty of people who tried to hang on to what they had or take a risk for something perceived as *better*, but at their own peril.

For what had felt like years, Jonah would have been OK with dying. Being dead after what had happened to his friends in Oberstein would have practically been welcome. Back then, he didn't feel that he had anything to live for, which in hindsight wasn't true, but he still felt that way for a long time. No matter his state of mind then, or whether he deserved to live or die, now Jonah definitely had something to live for: Doreen and Heike. They came first, even before himself.

An extermination mission was the best way to demolish regret, and the Molters were in a frenzy. They must have been starving because they didn't seem to be giving up any droplets of blood, except that meant they wouldn't

be feeding much longer.

Raising the detonator, Jonah took the NVGs off. He covered his eyes with a hand and turned away. Then he detonated the mines he'd set.

The explosion shattered the night, ripping across the land like anchored thunder, even long enough to briefly scare off the bullying wind. Molter parts and guts landed within the blast radius but especially outside it, coating nearby tree trunks with sticky chunks and spraying them with bloody mist.

Jonah dropped his hand, maintaining his night vision before pulling the NVGs back on. The warmth of the blast made it look as if the green snow was on fire. He aimed his silenced automatic rifle—the perfect weapon for this mission—in the general vicinity of where he suspected the survivors of the attack were hiding and headed down the hill on the run.

The massive blast had killed most of them but not all as he'd expected. There always seemed to be a few away from the others, as if they were in charge of the rest and forced to be more cautious, out of range of any danger. Molters naturally spaced themselves out, similar to what soldiers were trained to do to survive a sudden attack that may or may not happen. Jonah had counted on that.

Even though there had been many feeding on the deer, there were more, unseen, waiting to feed, or they might have already fed elsewhere. Jonah didn't know. Even with creatures like them, when there was a pack, there seemed to be a pecking order.

Before they could scramble into the trees—luckily, they were still on the ground and stunned—Jonah fired his automatic rifle, shooting two in the head. He squeezed and released the trigger, accurately firing bursts of silent *cracks* into the others as he arrived at the blast area. The remaining ones fell at practically the same time.

The last of them alive gasped on its back, its jaws gnashing at the air, somehow still alive with a hole in its head that leaked blood. It was another green one, unlike the first strain he'd encountered—which had been pale—but like the outlying rest of them he'd just killed and the one in the cave. It was naked with no hint of sex, just veiny muscles.

Where the first Molters he encountered had lips, these did not. Where its lips should have been, there were many teeth that lined its mouth, almost like a sea anemone but one peppered with fangs. Its only purpose for living was to kill and to feed what was growing within. Was it was born with the mouth teeth? Did they grow after? He'd never seen a green one molt.

No matter the specific trajectory of the evolution of the Molters, or whether they still lived to sacrifice themselves to feed Behemoths, they used people to be born. That Jonah could count on, which made his next move his only choice because the creature splayed out below him was a threat, a killer in its own right, but also filled with Infectors, the spiderlike creature that's only purpose was to bite a host and infect them to begin a molting.

It drew in ragged, wet breaths, and after looking down, Jonah saw it was

also shot in its muscular chest; the veins that covered it were as thick as ropes. The chest wound must have been why it couldn't move its body. The bullet must have damaged its spine. All it could do was flex its claws with rabid frustration in the snow as it was unable to grab hold of him.

Its immobility allowed Jonah to yank out the depleted magazine, slap in a fresh one, yank the charging handle, lower the weapon just above its face and gnashing jaws, and squeeze the trigger.

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CHAPTER 2

The first stage of the Molting was the Behemoths. Molters was the second. The third seemed to be the Molters with green skin that birthed Infectors. The new strain didn't cocoon and liquefy to become food for a Behemoth like their predecessors after they'd fed on enough blood. Instead, once the Infectors within them gestated, the Molter itself burst open—practically exploded from the waist up—and poured forth death on spiderlike legs that propelled the Molting closer to the annihilation of the human race.

All three stages reacted and built upon the others and still coexisted, it seemed, but no cure for each, and a person was required to die for their kind to populate. The possibility for a cure was a pleasant fantasy for a while, but that's all it turned out to be. It wasn't real. How could it be? In hindsight, it was easy for Jonah to remember why he'd believed that it might be possible in the first place. It was just so horrible to watch someone cease being who they were, fall unconscious, and wake up briefly just to molt.

He'd also believed a cure might be possible because of simple logic. After being bitten by an Infector, there was a sudden change in someone, a mutation, and for a while it seemed conceivable to reverse it to some degree because it happened so quickly. Under the right conditions and with the most sophisticated surgical instruments and medicine and after long documented studies and the communication of information of those studies to others who were the most gifted, skilled, and innovative medical personnel all over the world, then some sort of treatment must be possible.

The hard truth was that none of what was required for that scenario to take place even existed. The doctors who could have begun to investigate a cure were long dead. Those who could have helped the most were the first to die because they were the first to deal with the plague in the first place. Not to mention the natural order of any perceived contagion with panicked loved ones bringing their family members to hospitals in droves wondering what could be happening to them. The tools and medicine and complex medical machines necessary for such treatments were now relics, the personnel with the knowledge to use all of it dead. All of it might as well be considered alien technology.

The one thing Jonah continued to believe, and would always have faith in, was that there were surely some people still alive who also still believed in what he used to, enough to argue and possibly make him think differently, but Jonah was a realist. He remembered hypothesizing about the very subject of a cure with Sven while living in Henrytown. Even then, there were doubts, but people couldn't prevent their positive nature. Most saw a half-empty cup and focused on what was in it and not already gone. Even though there was still hope, the reality—and what Jonah and everyone else should probably accept

—was that once people molted, they were gone, replaced by what took over every particle of who they had been.

Molters' behavior seemed to be in a continuous state of change, probably because they were evolving, and what used to keep Jonah and his people safe was no longer reliable. Molters often hunted as a pack, were seen during the day, and many or most no longer ended up as Behemoth food. The new strain of green Molters were Infector bombs and rogues that could go as far as their clawed feet could take them. The creatures were once again as unpredictable as when the Molting first began, and they weren't the only things that seemed to be changing.

Jonah tried to imagine the world as it had been before the Molting and places people normally commiserated: cities, towns, working at their jobs, walking the streets. While there was traffic, irritation would flare up among drivers enough to honk horns. For most of them, that had been the most troublesome part of their day. Jonah thought of all the parties, birthdays, and family reunions during the summer, just groups of people doing whatever they wished, getting together for any reason. Lately, he found he had trouble remembering the way it used to be, and if a city was full of pedestrians, they all likely had sharp teeth.

Their numbers had tipped as if *they* were the ones that were supposed to be at the top of the food chain. Jonah and his fellow humans had some say in whether they got knocked off the top or not, but it was definitely going to be a hell of an uphill battle. There may not be a way to reverse a molting, but one thing Jonah believed in—what he knew for sure—was that those creatures could be killed.

See how well they deal with a nuclear bomb.

That type of weapon might not even be possible, either, as likely to be used as the complicated medical instruments Jonah imagined. The battle that would decide things would not happen today. There was some time in between now and the end, and if they lived to see another winter, they would be safer, perhaps long enough to witness a new beginning.

The positive aspect of where they lived was the snow never melted for long even though the seasons technically changed. The temperature rose and fell, but it mostly remained cold, as if the territory surrounding the cabin were winter all year long. There just seemed to be less snow or some bare spots throughout the other seasons. Jonah remembered his first conversation with Henry on the road and knew the Molting hadn't just altered every living thing that walked the face of the earth, but the atmosphere too.

The beginning of spring showed some normalcy by there being birds. Jonah first heard them while hunting with Heike. Their incessant chirping was a welcome sound, just as Doreen's laugh was, because complete silence was jarring. When the snow was deepest, he thought the white silenced the world around him, and silence reminded him of death. Though he was apprehensive about how things would be and what was possible—the deep snow that kept

them there also prevented others from reaching the cabin—he would still remain vigilant to anticipate any repercussions the brief rise in temperature threw at them. Usually, that meant more Molters.

What was surprising, but somewhat comforting, was that the area had been without the creatures since his extermination mission using the dead deer. Something told him his regimented clearing wasn't entirely the reason he hadn't had to stalk and kill more.

Another mystery to solve, he thought.

That was his current reality, but it still didn't make him feel comfortable. After all that had happened, and no matter how safe he felt, he'd learned it was better to assume Molters could show up at any time.

Doreen had grown bored with him describing what he did each day long ago, so he didn't always tell her everything even though he wanted to. Men liked to talk about their work. Jonah was no different. Women liked being with a man who was passionate about something, and that something could be anything, but they typically only wanted to hear about it so much. Doreen did a terrific job of pretending not to be bored hearing about his missions by holding her eyes open slightly wider than normal—he'd noticed her doing that but never mentioned it—so he was choosy when he brought it up in their conversations. Clearing had technically become his profession, and Doreen didn't always want to hear about such bloody work.

What else was there to talk about, though? The thought crossed his mind on occasion, but he showed restraint and reminded himself just as often how much women, or anyone really, liked to do the talking.

It was important to converse about the day to day, but that often reminded everyone of all the unpleasantness going on, too, so instead of bringing up all he did during his missions, Jonah asked more questions about what Doreen and Heike were up to. What they talked about was more on the normal side of things, the niceties of the world. In fact, he did more listening lately than he ever had in his life. Perhaps it was meant to be that way: women talking, men listening. Doreen justified that she wasn't as good a listener as he was because her ears weren't as big as his. It made him laugh.

After concluding his morning routine, including a controlled panic about their present circumstances, he went back inside the cabin and was pleased to see Doreen had risen earlier than normal and was making some sort of breakfast, working busily on the countertop by the sink. She hardly ever got up early, and he'd grown used to her sleeping in. He went on perimeter check missions just about every day, so he was never quite sure how long she stayed in bed. Definitely not after Heike woke up, but he realized she had probably gotten used to staying in bed when she was depressed after her miscarriage.

But she was obviously feeling better now. When Jonah asked her what she was making, Doreen only replied, "Breakfast," and then grinned mischievously. Puffs of steam escaped the top of the metal coffeepot on the woodstove.

"That ready?"

"Pour yourself a cup and find out."

Jonah usually made himself some coffee anywhere between when his morning routine began and before he went out on a mission, so it was nice that it was already ready. "My favorite part of the day. Unless you want to hug and kiss," he said, stealthily patting her on the bottom on his way to grab a coffee mug from the cupboard.

"I always want to hug and kiss," Doreen whispered.

Jonah poured himself a steaming mug of black coffee and sat down at the dinner table. "Me too," he whispered back. He took a careful sip as it was very hot.

"What are you whispering about?" Heike said from her room.

"Nothing, sweetie. Your dad—" Doreen stared at Jonah, and her face reddened. "I mean, Jonah was just making a joke."

Her slip of the tongue made him smile and feel as warm as if he'd just drunk a shot of premium whiskey. Heike's real father had passed away, but Jonah was very much alive and more than willing to do his best to help with that role. He felt as if Heike were his real daughter. He had trouble remembering not feeling that way.

Jonah took another sip. "I wasn't joking," he whispered.

She waved at him playfully. "How was your workout?" she said in a tone that meant she wanted to change the subject.

If there were any hugging and kissing, it would be tonight. "Great," he said.

"You aren't sweating."

Jonah set his mug down, groaned, and stood. "I'll be back."

"No! I'm being humorous."

"I'll have to visit the outhouse soon." Coffee always seemed to get things moving on his insides. Even just a few sips. "Sit down and do some paperwork."

"Gross!" Heike yelled from her room.

"Hey, you have to do it too," Jonah said.

"Yeah, but I'm the one doing it, so it's not so bad."

Jonah chuckled and took a sip of the steaming coffee, barely enough to fill an empty 9mm shell because it was still too hot to take a pull as if it were the whiskey he would no longer allow himself to drink. Except he loved the taste of the coffee so much he could hardly wait. He blew on it instead. "Heike, what are you doing in there?"

"Reading!"

"Don't yell, please," Doreen said.

"OK," Heike said.

"Is all that reading making you hungry?" Jonah said. "Your mom is making . . . well, *something*."

"You keep making jokes, and you're going to have to make your own

something." Doreen made butcher knife slices into the pan.

"What is it?" Heike called out. "It smells bad."

"*Heike!*" Doreen said and brought the pan to the table.

"Whatever it is, it's ready, Heike," Jonah said.

"Such a funny guy." After placing a potholder down and setting the pan on top, Doreen sat across Jonah's lap and put her arms around him. "It doesn't smell bad, does it?"

"Smells delicious," he said and kissed her. "Don't get me started now."

She wiggled back and forth on his lap and then leaped off when Heike appeared. "You hungry?"

"No, but I will eat," Heike said, and sat down at the dinner table, eyeing the pan. "Is it ready?"

"We're letting it cool," Doreen said.

Heike shot Jonah a look, and Jonah said, "Sorry, almost ready. What were you reading?"

"A suspenseful story where dead people have come back to life."

Doreen's brows knit together. "I don't like you reading those kinds of books. Jonah?"

"What?" he said. As if it were his fault. Actually, he realized, it was. He took any book that might interest any of them. Heike just happened to be reading one that he had wanted to read. "Well, I guess I grabbed that one for me."

"I like it," Heike said. "But the monsters in it aren't very scary."

That definitely wasn't true. The cover was why Jonah had been interested in the book in the first place. The artist who'd designed the cover was quite good and was able to display the feeling that the reader was about to be overwhelmed by reaching hands. Heike obviously wanted to continue reading and was doing her best to pretend that, cover to cover, the book wasn't absolutely horrifying in a pretend sort of way.

There was no way a book equaled what they were dealing with in real life. How could it? Not compared to the real monsters they had to contend with. Mental escape through entertainment, even through a suspenseful—or even terrifying—story could be very therapeutic, similar to the many games Heike played, which was why he was always bringing them home. That was why Jonah hadn't sabotaged Heike's ruse.

"It isn't giving you bad dreams, is it?" Doreen said.

"No," Heike said with conviction and obviously hoping her mom wouldn't take the book away from her.

"What language is the book written in?"

"English. Jonah said there's a lot of books written in English because of all the American soldiers who were stationed here since World War Two."

"That figures."

Heike stared at the steaming food in the pan. "If it isn't good, do I have to eat it?"

Jonah's brow furrowed. "You haven't even *tried* it yet."

"You haven't, either."

"It'll be good," Jonah said. "Everything your mom makes is tasty."

"Yeah, but you like everything."

"What? Well, I guess that's true. I even like food I don't like."

"That's confusing."

"I agree," Jonah said, and looked at Doreen questioningly.

"Go ahead and dish up. After you both take a bite, let me know what you think," Doreen said with confidence.

Jonah took Doreen's plate and shoveled some steaming mystery breakfast onto it. Whatever it was, it was making his stomach growl, especially after exercising. It looked like a mixture of biscuits, potatoes, eggs, and meat—some kind of sausage. It was likely rabbit, one of Heike's latest kills.

"Do you like everything because you were a soldier?" Heike said.

Jonah spooned a small scoop onto Heike's plate. "You definitely have to eat what you're given, but I've never been picky."

"Even when you were just a boy?"

"Nope."

"What foods don't you like . . . um, that you like but don't like?" Heike shrugged. "That sounds weird."

"It sure does," Doreen said.

Jonah finally spooned a heaving portion onto his own plate. "Brussel sprouts, broccoli, let's see . . . what else?"

"So vegetables," Heike said.

"For the most part." He grabbed his fork and noticed both of them looking his way: Doreen with anticipation, Heike just to make sure it didn't taste awful. He took a forkful, blew away steam, and made the food disappear into his mouth. "Jeez, this is *good*." Then he took a drink of coffee.

Doreen's smile was immediate. Jonah's reaction meant the food wasn't poisonous, so Heike took a bite too. She followed it with an immediate *mmm* sound. Doreen took a small bite and tasted it as carefully as if Jonah had made the dish himself, and she wasn't sure about whether it would be worth eating or not. Then Jonah noticed Doreen eyeing the pan, and he realized she was eating slowly in case either of them wanted to eat some more. It was her man who had dished her up, after all, and he'd given her as much as if he were eating off her plate. Doreen was only interested in their enjoying the dish she'd prepared. She was so selfless, as so many women were, especially mothers, always thinking of others before themselves.

"You gotta tell me what this is," Jonah said.

Doreen smiled and winked. "It's a secret."

"And what's in this secret?"

"Yeah, Mom."

"I'm not falling for that. It's my secret. And if I told you, you wouldn't be so impressed, but it's a quiche. Basically."

"Oh. What kind of meat?" As Doreen continued that playful little smirk of hers, Jonah said, "It's gotta be Behemoth."

"Jonah!"

Heike lowered her fork. *"Eww."*

"Ick," Doreen said. "No."

Jonah remembered saying the same thing to Bernard when Henry introduced him in Henrytown. He hadn't been joking then, but, of course, it had turned out to be funny. They'd had everything they needed back then—in terms of essentials—just as they did at the cabin. Jonah thought about Bernard and wondered where he was now. And the others who'd survived. He hoped they were all still alive and that one day he'd find out they were doing well and be relieved of worrying about them all the time.

Heike was still staring down at her food. "Mom?"

"He was kidding," Doreen said.

"Sorry," Jonah said, and laughed. "Bad joke. I do like it, though, Doreen. A lot. It's *really*, *really* good. Thank you."

"Yes, Mom. It is. Thank you."

"You are both very welcome."

And with that, they enjoyed the rest of the . . . quiche?

All three helped clear the table after the morning meal was over. There were no leftovers. Not with Jonah and Heike's appetites, but also food didn't keep so well without refrigeration. Jonah had considered digging a root cellar, but most of their food was packaged or canned, and their fresh kills were eaten quickly or made into jerky. And deep down he knew they weren't going to stay at the cabin for very long. Digging a root cellar—figuratively putting down roots—meant they intended the place to be their home, but he didn't want them to think of it that way. Planning for the future was a process Jonah had established when he was young, and that was because so many decisions ended up being short term.

Yes, she was beautiful, but she wasn't nice, so not the one for you.

Take the apartment closest to the street, easier to move out that way. Don't decorate it; you aren't staying.

Don't worry about rising in rank; you won't be in the military long. You're not a lifer.

It was ironic, but staying light and fit to move whenever it was necessary was something he had learned even before the military, when he was a teenager because he had lived in a few apartments. It was ingrained in him even more while he was a soldier. Because he'd moved so many times—hundreds, if including field exercises while wearing a uniform—and for most of his adult life, he took that lesson with him even when he was no longer a soldier. That way he felt he could stay ahead of danger.

Heike was zipping back and forth with dishes so quickly it was as if she thought she were being timed, but it was only because once her job was over, she could go do whatever she felt like doing within the safe confines of the cabin. This morning, she clearly wanted to get back to her horror book. She placed the last plate roughly in the sink, and it clattered on top of the others.

"Be gentle. It will break," Doreen said.

Heike grimaced. "Sorry."

"That's OK. Now go get dressed for the day. *Before* you play."

"I was going to get back in bed and read some more."

"You don't want to stay in bed all day like some lazy person."

"I'm not!" she protested. "I'm simply the most comfortable while I *read* there."

Doreen considered her decision far longer than her daughter's patience lasted. If Doreen said no to her then Heike would have a look on her face that little girls did when they were mad but doing their best to hide it, and it would probably last for days.

"Just for a while," Doreen said. "Then Jonah will have something for you to do." She looked over at him expectantly.

"Really?" Heike said. "What?"

"Um . . ." Jonah said. "Yes, something very important. That needs to be done and I will think about how to explain it."

"Go read, Heike!" Doreen said with a hint of humor.

"Yay!" Heike said as if it were the best thing she'd ever heard and quickly disappeared into her room.

Doreen and Jonah laughed. What went on within the confines of their walls had almost nothing to do with what stalked, hunted, and fed everywhere else on the planet. Especially while they were having a meal together. They were in control of their lives. They weren't victims, refused to be, and laughter was one of the best weapons to wield against adversity. Doreen began cleaning the dishes at the sink.

"Want me to help?"

"No, I want you to sit and relax."

"Sounds good to me."

Jonah being who he was, it only took a minute for a familiar necessity to tug at his mind. One that he'd been meaning to get to. So far this morning, he had chopped wood, exercised, listened to the radio, gone over his map, checked on the trucks, examined the lock on the cellar door, and eaten so his belly was full. He'd even gotten a decent night's sleep *and* was working on a cup of coffee. All was right in the world. All he had to do now was some paperwork, but his insides weren't quite ready.

"This is nice," he said. "It really is, but I've been thinking about a certain mission."

"To clear?"

"Always, but I'm talking about a different kind I've been planning,

exploring farther than normal. And I want you to be prepared for when I leave."

She paused her scrubbing. "How far?"

"I don't know."

She resumed her scrubbing. "You're not leaving the country, are you?"

"No, no. Not *that* far. I just need to see what's out there. Beyond the extended perimeter. Briefly."

"That you *control*."

"I know it's dangerous. I do."

"When?"

"Soon. Once there's a little more snowmelt."

"Why?"

"Gut feeling."

"Like in the cave?"

"Yes."

"Did you have a bad dream about it?"

"If I did, I don't remember. Spring has never begun so early for us since we've been here."

"There's still snow on the ground."

"And probably a few more snowfalls in the forecast, too, but we can't deny the time of year. I don't want us to be overwhelmed by . . . a threat that's just around the corner, besides the obvious. Something we aren't aware of. What we don't know enough about."

"Oh. So it's just a scouting mission?"

"Mostly. There could be anything out there. Even other food stores, ones I'm not aware of. It's not as if we're getting low on what we need, but we probably only have about six months' worth of food."

That was only because they hadn't been rationing much lately. They ate as much as they wanted, but he didn't want to say that. Admit it. They really had more than six months' worth of food, but he was only referring to what was stored in the cellar for the present conversation. Jonah had buried food all over Germany, and most of it would last for years, last them that long, too, but it still wasn't enough for him to be comfortable. Realistically, no amount would.

When it came down to it, enough never seemed to be enough, and to limit what they ate would take away from their lives, especially Heike's. They wanted to make everything as normal for her as possible. They used to be much better at rationing, especially Jonah when he was on his own after Oberstein, but the lack of danger led to a feeling of normalcy, and normal felt good for all three of them. It was difficult not to indulge if you remembered what it was like to be hungry. If they really needed to limit how much they ate each day, they could and they would, but for now it wasn't necessary.

"But you hunt," she said.

"Yes, but I never know how long I'll be able to do that."

Doreen was quiet for about a minute. “You said briefly. How brief?”

“About a day or two and be back by one of those nights. I’ll just slide into bed with you. Be back before you know it. You’ll hardly know I was gone.”

“Then you don’t know me as well as you think you do.”

It was Jonah’s turn to be silent. Doreen dipped the dishes in the second sink filled with hot, steaming water and a rubber stopper at the bottom—for now—and placed the clean dishes on a drying rack set over a towel on the countertop. The water in both sinks was ready to drain downward into pipes, empty into a jug, and then fill separate buckets.

If there was ever a clog—young girls tended to forget what could go down the drain in a dry cabin and what couldn’t—all Jonah had to do was disassemble the pipes, clear the clog, and put it all back together, which he’d had to a few times. Heike hadn’t made that mistake in a while, though. She was a little older now, showed it in her maturity, had always been a smart girl, and like all women, young or old, had a good memory.

“What about my father?” Doreen said.

“Nothing would change. If we did move, we could leave a note or a map for him. I don’t think we’re going to leave any time soon, though. I’m too uncertain about things, and I need some clarity.”

“Do you want to go back to America?”

“What?”

“Once this is all over.”

Jonah clasped his hands behind his head. “Do you really think that will be possible?”

“Don’t you?”

“I don’t know.”

Jonah had many reasons to go back to the States, mostly to seek out his family. For a while, he had also wanted to go back because he wanted to explain to the families of his friends what had happened to them face to face. But he didn’t know if those he intended to speak with were even still alive. Most likely not.

“Go back? I haven’t really thought about it seriously for a long time. The only reason is for family . . .” He was aware that Heike was probably listening, but he always did his best to be honest with her. “Honestly, I don’t even know if they’re still alive.” Jonah’s hands went to his lap to interlock, and he leaned on his knees. “Where’s this coming from?”

Doreen shrugged. “I’m wondering what the next step is for us. You seem intent to leave.”

“I’m not, but we’ve been here for—”

“I *know* we can’t stay here forever, but how exactly . . . ? This new mission, are you going on foot or by vehicle?”

“Before we move, I want to know what’s going on in other places.”

“You didn’t answer me.”

“By truck. Your dad’s truck. Both trucks are dependable, and as long as I

keep the doors locked . . .”

“Yes, you can drive through them, but almost any vehicle can get overturned by a Behemoth.”

“Except it’s not them that scare me.”

“What then?”

“We have it good here. What I do, what we do, keeps us safe. We’re secluded. But the fact is if a day comes when things change drastically in unforeseeable ways, and we aren’t safe anymore, and we’re forced to leave without knowing where we’re going, we’ll undoubtedly encounter somebody who understands the value of the truck we’d be driving. Not to mention everything we’d have with us. I don’t have to remind you that your dad shot at me when we first met. And that was shortly after the Molting began. I can’t help but think of what people are capable of now.”

“You think I haven’t thought of that? How stupid do you think I am?”

Jonah definitely didn’t answer that question. He knew it had just slipped out. Even with all attempted normalcy, the stress of surviving seeped through on occasion. He didn’t say anything for what felt like five minutes. Neither did Doreen. Both doing what men and women did to make a relationship work best, which was to respect each other’s feelings the best they could.

Heike had no doubt been eavesdropping but had likely gone back to reading by now. Jonah and Doreen didn’t want to argue in front of her even if she was technically in another room. Not ever, if they could help it, even though squabbles had sparked up in the past. They argued in private whenever possible.

“I’m sorry,” she said.

“It’s OK.” Again, Jonah thought of Heike and what she must think about everything going on, but he was hardly ever secretive about his missions. “I figure I go out once and get the lay of the land, more east, where I’m unfamiliar. That way, when we do eventually move, I’ll know where to take us.”

“He’s right, Mom,” Heike said from her room.

Doreen stared at him. “I know he is, honey,” she called out, “but if he thinks he isn’t taking a radio with him, he’s crazy.”

Jonah winked at her and finished the last sip of his coffee. “OK. I’ll be back. Coffee and breakfast equals paperwork.”

“Gross!” Heike said from her room.

“*Heike*,” Doreen said.

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CHAPTER 3

With his binoculars in hand, and with the last snowfall melting, the cocoons looked almost beautiful, practically as noticeable as holiday ornaments as they sagged from the branches of the very large trees they hung from. His shots had been more accurate as of late, which was to say he'd spotted more to destroy. That was helped by the change in season, so it was far easier to notice new ones forming. Heike's method of recording cocoon placement according to time using the pocket watch, pen, and paper—her present to him during the previous holiday—helped even more for accuracy.

After some grumbling from a certain little girl, Jonah had finally been allowed to haul the holiday tree out of the cabin. There was only so much space inside their small quarters, so it had been nice to make more room as it had been before. Plus, it made him less nervous not having a dried tree near a burning woodstove. Still, those blasted pine needles still occasionally poked him when he sat down on the couch for weeks afterward. To the amusement of the ladies, he seemed to be the only one it happened to.

Only the distance the quick-release scope was capable of viewing made it possible for him to clear the territory on foot. If he hadn't had a scope, he would have been forced to make long treks, which might be perilous and possibly attract unwanted attention, so he made sure he not only was careful with the scope but also kept a lookout for backups. He currently possessed nine extras, but only one was another quick-release. The other scopes would require mounting, one of which already was mounted but on a different bolt-action rifle for Doreen in case there was heavy trouble while he was away.

Some scopes were in the cellar, but the others he had buried. After the latest mission he was planning, he might not need weapons at all. It would be nice to live in a place where he didn't have to be armed to the teeth everywhere he went. Even to the outhouse. Even better, he would rather report to a heavily armed community. It would also be nice not to be in charge for a while.

Though a shot from a rifle caused a tremendous report and could be heard—by other people, if they were in the area, and by Molters—it was brief. Something as big and noisy as a truck engine created continuous sound, so Jonah chose not to drive to the ridges. And it wasn't as if he stored as much fuel as he did weapons and other supplies. Fuel was something he was forced to ration. Traveling on horseback would have been ideal, but he'd never seen a horse alive since he'd returned to Germany. Plus, it would be difficult to keep one fed, and a tied-up horse would practically be bait to Molters.

Having any animal outside would no doubt attract attention needlessly. The pigs, chickens, and rabbits raised for food by the citizens of Henrytown came to mind. But the idea of riding a horse had crossed his mind numerous

times. Maybe owning one was something that would be possible in the future, when things were safer. He was used to traveling on foot anyway. It was something he'd done for many years now, since he was a younger man, but even Jonah got sore legs and feet every so often, no matter how good of shape he considered himself to be in.

The melting snow also made it possible to spot grave mounds near the cabin, and Jonah knew the look of them all too well. Not a surprise, he expected them, just not so damn many. The farther away from the cabin he went, the more of them appeared. They practically multiplied with every booted step. Every one of them meant a frightened person had fought for their life only to be sucked dry by one of the bloodthirsty creatures, and the evidence of that was then hidden by burying it underground.

It wasn't necessary for him to dig them up to know what had been buried —a desiccated corpse after a Molter fed on it or just a skeleton if the remains had been in the ground long enough. He recognized grave mounds in an instant and would be able to do that for the rest of his life. His best friend, Eric, had ended up as one, killed by the first Molter they had encountered. Grave mounds were something Jonah and Eric had first seen at the hospital in Oberstein, but that was back when the Molting began. Years later, there were far more people who had died than in that town. Still, there were so many mounds near the cabin it was almost as if all mankind had attempted to seek refuge in these mountains. He could only imagine the numbers elsewhere.

Plus, the mounds were practically invisible when the snow was deep. He couldn't have seen them. The area hadn't been free of Molters after all, as he'd originally thought; it had been flooded with them, or at least with people before they'd either been killed or molted. Between when Henry had come across the cabin and their arrival, a large group of men and women—and surely children—had come to get away from what had eventually taken their lives. The Molters found them and fed on them, or Infectors had used them to molt.

Molters had been relatively scarce around the cabin, aside from a few here and there, even small packs of them, but most likely that was because they'd exhausted the land of those they considered to be prey and moved on years ago. It made the territory practically lifeless, except for Jonah, Doreen, Heike, some rabbits, quite a few birds, and a few lucky deer. Henry had been mostly right; the cabin was safe, but it hadn't always been that way. Then again what place ever is? And for how long could it last?

If Molters could hunt down people, which they clearly could, and they could sense when a territory was absent prey and abandon it, then couldn't the opposite be true? Would they be able to sense where people were living and establish a hunting ground? Or even scarier, reestablish a hunting ground?

Jonah shook his head at his endless questions and chuckled silently, clouds of his breath visible, breaking the tension. He contemplated the enemy so much he thought that maybe he should write things down. Write a paper or a

briefing, something others could eventually read. Not only to explain what he knew about them for his own sanity, like therapy, but also to pass on his knowledge in case he got himself killed.

He couldn't very well bother Doreen with every thought that preoccupied his mind. It wasn't just a physical danger the creatures represented; they also affected people's behavior, changed them and how they lived their lives, just as every battle for survival in the past had affected those who'd fought. But also those who had survived war.

The necessary bullets had been fired from the ridge he designated the most necessary for today, the quick-release scope removed from the rifle and put in his black backpack, and he was going home. As he cautiously walked the woods, rifle barrel pointed safely at the ground, he saw what at first he believed to be a tree that had fallen over with its roots sticking out of the ground. He stopped and listened. It sounded like rain in the distance, but he didn't see or feel any raindrops. Not yet anyway. Maybe there was a storm headed their way?

What had given him pause didn't look wet, which was something unavoidable right now; the ice and snow and all of winter kept on melting. Then he noticed there was no trunk to the tree, but also that it wasn't a tree at all, and what he'd originally mistaken for branches were actually legs.

Those legs belonged to a Behemoth. Long dead and dried up, concealed by the blanket of winter. Jonah had never seen one like that before. It wasn't strange that it was dead, since all living things died eventually, but it looked so out of place and exposed. The thing looked shriveled up and dehydrated, almost as if it had been drained of life before death, similar to what was buried in grave mounds.

Except the Behemoth had not been buried. It looked like a colossal dried-up arachnid, only one the size of a house. He remembered the Behemoth that had chosen to make an actual house its home in the town before Jonah made it to Henrytown. The one he had hunted down with Donnelly, Jacobs, and Salgado.

No doubt the dead Behemoth he was looking at had been on the hunt, but clearly without Molters to serve it and become its food, so it had likely died of starvation. After that, it was buried by snowfall. Or, and this was an even scarier thought, but had the Behemoth been attacked by Molters, drained and killed, but left exposed? If it had happened that way, wouldn't the Molters have buried it as they typically did?

Either scenario was unnerving, but what disturbed Jonah most of all was the thought of new Molters discarding their burial behavior. It meant their instincts told them they were unstoppable. He was about to remove a tan cold-weather shooting glove and reach out to touch the Behemoth with his bare

hand to see what it felt like, out of curiosity, but thought better of it. Some of what the creatures were capable of was still unknown, and they were obviously still evolving.

Getting infected somehow and then going back to the cabin to molt would be the stupidest thing Jonah could ever do. He always stayed as far away from them as possible, just close enough to kill them with weapons, and was willing to take them on in a close-quarters fight, but he had never gone out of his way to touch any of them before, and he should definitely keep it that way.

If he ever believed something had gone wrong and he would molt, he wouldn't hesitate to put a barrel in his mouth. Of course, he'd leave a note first.

Before going into the cabin, he stopped at the outhouse—he was already drinking more water now that it was warmer, and Doreen wanted him to go number one in there, too, instead of anywhere around the cabin because Heike was always looking out the windows and daydreaming. He should have gone earlier when he had first felt that familiar tickle on his insides.

Jonah had tried to explain to Doreen that urinating outdoors was practically euphoric for men, but it was as if he was speaking another language. She didn't understand, and he agreed he would only do that while away or at night. Done relieving himself and almost to the porch, he froze.

Son of a bitch! Already?

After carefully leaning the rifle against the side of the cabin, he drew out his 9mm and quickly attached the silencer ready in one of his cargo pockets. It wasn't as if he had the time to warn Doreen by radio. Its noise would give away his position. It was one or the other. He couldn't very well do both, so he chose the weapon.

As he held the pistol in his right hand, he realized he had thought the man was a Molter at first. But Molters moved very differently than people, even though they were born from them. They hunched, arms out as if always ready to wrap them around prey, and couldn't prevent themselves from looking menacing. When encountering people, it was always wise to be cautious no matter how human they looked. Sometimes, strangely—and incomprehensibly—those who were infected were themselves when they woke up right before they were about to molt. Occasionally, they were even talking before it happened.

The man looked lost, curious, but he was also clearly a threat; he looked like one in a much more recognizable way because he was a person and armed with a Russian assault rifle, its strap over his shoulder. A regular beastly threat was almost welcome because, even though when there was one Molter, there were at least two or three or more, at least they didn't carry any weapons other than their teeth and claws. Jonah absolutely hated the idea of going to battle

with any kind of threat so close to his people.

The present threat was there to take things, obviously. Probably. Maybe not. It was the way he was skulking around that gave Jonah pause, as opposed to his greeting the man immediately. He was going about things as a thief would, cautious but lurking, as if he were hoping not to be seen by anyone if they were inside the cabin so he could continue doing what he was doing and avoid accidentally getting shot. Then again, if Jonah were him, he'd probably be wondering the same thing—What was in there for the taking?—but also ready for any threats, man or Molter. That man was still alive, so he definitely knew Molters could hunt during the day.

Even though it was true that they hunted during the day from time to time, Jonah should have realized the man wasn't a Molter immediately because a Molter being out when it wasn't dark was something of a rarity. Easily countable since the battle of Henrytown. One of the only exceptions were the ones he'd killed a few months ago last winter.

The world still looked like winter, but it wasn't. As much snow as had melted still remained, but technically spring had sprung. Maybe that was why the cabin had been stumbled upon? Something that also crossed Jonah's mind was that smoke rising up from the chimney could have led him here, but if it had, he would have needed to be in close proximity in the first place.

But even nearby, because of the denseness of the trees, the cabin was hardly noticeable, even by those who had called it home these last few years. Plus, they hadn't burned as much wood since it had gotten warmer. No, Jonah realized human behavior changed with the weather, became more exploratory, and he was no different.

The man hadn't noticed Jonah standing as still as the trees surrounding him as he cupped his hands around his eyes to stare into the window on the passenger side of Henry's truck. A gloved hand checked the door handle to find it locked. Locking doors was a habit Jonah was glad he still had.

Locking a vehicle hadn't really been necessary—until now—but one reason he did so was that he'd learned Molters could open doors. He always kept the truck doors locked so that he wouldn't open it one day to find a Molter inside, ready to launch out at him. He honestly hadn't thought of the habit as a way to keep people out. He hadn't even considered a person attempting a break in in years, and he also wasn't used to seeing anyone other than Doreen or Heike.

Then it crossed Jonah's mind that the man might know Henry; he hoped that somehow he did. His deductions were momentary and required as a soldier, a former one, now a new kind reborn from his past, and necessary due to the evolution of the new Earth.

Only a few seconds passed before Jonah realized who the man truly was to him: a stranger. A threat obviously interested in the trucks and then likely what was inside the cabin. The stranger had probably noticed the trucks could drive anywhere since they were equipped with snow tires.

The man crept closer to the cabin, trying to get a look inside it. When he got to the front door, it looked as if he was contemplating whether or not to kick it in, seconds away from putting Jonah's loved ones in danger. Who knew what he would do to them? Would he leave after discovering it was occupied? Would he be decent enough only to request supplies, food, or weapons? Would he just kill them outright? Was he decent at all?

There was no way to tell what kind of man he was just by looking at him. Jonah felt his finger tighten on the trigger. *"Was ist los?"*

The guy jumped as he turned toward Jonah, fumbling in his jacket with one shaky hand while holding the strap of his assault rifle.

"Whoa," Jonah said, marching toward him, his left hand flat and up in a show of potential peace while his right hand raised and aimed his weapon. "*Deutsch*? English?"

The man likely spoke one of those languages, but he was intent on pulling something out of his jacket instead. Jonah was pretty sure what that something was, and if he were to guess what language the man spoke based on how he was dressed, it would be English. He made his intentions perfectly clear when he yanked a revolver out, seeming to have forgotten about the assault rifle over his shoulder, and raised it. He had no interest in conversing, only shooting.

Upon first sight of the stranger, Jonah had a terrible vision of the situation had he not gotten there in time. It was of his people being hauled out of the cabin against their will with frightened faces. But that wouldn't happen because of who Doreen was. Not just as a person and a protective mother but also as a former soldier.

Jonah was about to shoot to kill, but he didn't have to. He noticed the door to the cabin was cracked open. He also noticed that Doreen was aiming her snub-nose revolver. She fired the weapon three times.

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CHAPTER 4

The first bullet hit him in the shoulder, which spun him around as if he were intending to run—he had no doubt spotted a revolver aiming at him—but the second two disappeared into the back of his stocking cap. He pitched forward off the porch and splayed limply, the momentum of the fall sliding him across slush. After that he didn't move. He was clearly dead.

Jonah peered around, in case there were any more of them. *Probably.* He wouldn't have to explain what he needed to do. When Doreen stepped into view on the porch, the barrel of the snub-nose revolver he'd given to her as a gift still smoking, he placed his hand flat above his waist, at about Heike's height, and she gave him an enthusiastic thumbs-up. Heike was safe.

Doreen could handle herself, but she'd never had to kill anyone before. Jonah shoved his silenced pistol into the holster under his arm and briskly walked over to where he'd leaned his bolt-action rifle, then went to Doreen and handed it over along with the backpack, briefly trying to get a read on her. He couldn't. She seemed fine. It was probably because she'd been protecting Heike. Killing in cold blood was one thing, protecting someone you loved quite another.

Doreen placed Jonah's rifle and backpack down inside the cabin next to the door along with her revolver. He turned, quickly spotting the dead man's revolver on the ground. He walked over to it and picked it up, and as he did, he yanked the assault rifle free from under the corpse too. He trotted back to Doreen and handed both weapons to her.

As he backed away, he put a finger to his lips, then made a twisting motion, miming as if he held a key and locked a door. Doreen nodded and disappeared behind the cabin door with the revolver and assault rifle. He heard the lock *click* securely.

Because Jonah had to ensure the territory was clear, he went hunting. This time for members of his own species.

There were more of them. Jonah had kept his territory relatively free of the creatures, but that had the consequence of making it possible for other people to venture inside it. And as of right now, they were a threat. For some reason, he had never thought that would happen. In the past, he had actually looked forward to others showing up, especially Henry, and only in the back of his mind had he believed they would be hostile.

They were probably all part of the same group, but they'd separated, and they obviously weren't aware that Doreen had killed one of them, or even heard the gunshots. They weren't behaving like people who were in danger. It

was as if they were out for a casual stroll. That could mean anything.

Where had they come from? Was it just an outing, a break from a more stressful environment? Jonah remembered how he had behaved when he was done for the day in a war zone. People did their best to be normal whenever they could. And it wasn't as if their surroundings weren't gorgeous, with stubborn cold doing its best to ice the trees and cover the mountains with snow even though it was spring on every calendar.

Jonah followed the entire group from a distance until one of them separated. Jonah decided to follow him. Not directly behind him or across from the same path he was walking, but to his flank and always blocked by the cover of trees.

When he moved, Jonah did, too, to muffle the sound of his own steps. It was difficult even for Jonah to step noiselessly. The slush of melting snow and the snap of branches were practically amplified when everything else was silent. Even the wind seemed to be taking a break.

The man Doreen had killed must have just happened to stumble across the cabin. Jonah didn't think he had known it was there, or the others would have gone there too. If they had a specific destination, they wouldn't be wandering aimlessly through the woods as this man and the rest of his group were doing. He would deal with the others soon.

It must have meant they were searching. For something they weren't expecting? Similar to some of Jonah's own missions, they were probably hoping to discover supplies. But out in the woods? That didn't make any sense, unless they were simply exploring. That didn't really make any sense either because it was dangerous to do so. He didn't know them, but he was sure they at least understood that. Jonah wouldn't hesitate to do exactly the same thing, but hardly anyone was as well trained as he was or had his experience.

Of course, it was always possible for the naïve to get themselves into trouble. Just because they were the same species didn't mean they were smart. Or desperate enough to risk their lives for a great find. Jonah was a risk taker too. It was human nature, and he would be wise not to underestimate anyone. Especially people he'd never met.

Regardless, Jonah needed to stay close to the man he was following to see where he was heading, hoping it remained a random direction. That way, Jonah could do what he was prepared to do without notice. The one he was following looked to be on a hunt and was dressed that way, wearing bright orange clothing. But when a rabbit appeared, he didn't take the shot. He'd seen it, Jonah had seen him see it, but he didn't fire the shotgun he held ready. It seemed he wanted to remain quiet.

Well, the normal, untrained civilian type of quiet, Jonah thought. *I don't want to have to kill you.*

The dead man at the cabin had drawn his gun without hesitation with the intent to kill Jonah, so Jonah had had no choice but to defend himself. If

Doreen hadn't intervened, he would have. But killing his fellow man hadn't been necessary for Jonah since the war. Having to deal with people was completely different than having to deal with the creatures. Jonah had only killed Molters since the war, so the predicament was putting him on edge.

Following the man over a hill, the snow got even deeper as there were still patches of winter everywhere. Spring was probably only a mindset for humans. Nature had its own agenda, and it was as if it had other ideas. Best to think it was that season once it truly was, like if he ever got back to the States, especially on his home turf. He knew when a California spring began. They were practically summers, aside from June Gloom.

Some places were still so deep with snow that it had to be kicked through to venture forward, which the stranger did noisily. He reacted when tree branches snapped deep in the woods, and Jonah thought they almost sounded like silenced gunshots. The man was on edge, too, but in a way that made Jonah think it was not in anticipation of Molters, but of other people, and perhaps what he was willing to do to somebody if he crossed paths with them unexpectedly.

Jonah couldn't be sure about what kind of person he was, unless he reached for a gun like the other had. Jonah should probably try and talk with him, even though the last time didn't go so well. Whatever was about to happen, he felt nervously prepared.

A forest blanketed with snow made sound travel easily when it was melting, partially frozen, and crunchy, but especially when somebody who was being tracked didn't care how audible their footsteps were. It was also easier for the tracker to get spotted if he made the same noisy mistakes, so Jonah remained patient, controlled his breathing, and concentrated on avoiding any other noises he might accidentally make to give away his position.

Jonah tried to anticipate what a stranger was capable of, imagine what he was after exactly, where he was headed, but especially where he was coming from and if he belonged to a larger group. Larger than the group that was presently stomping around carelessly in the woods. There was no way to know any of that for sure, so speaking to him was probably Jonah's smartest option, as opposed to tracking him all day and being forced to deal with more of them than he could handle.

Keeping his hand ready to draw out his weapon, he would give the guy the benefit of the doubt until it was time to act. Deep down, Jonah suspected he was going to have to do what he didn't want to have to do. He didn't want to *have to*, though. Not only for the act itself—he'd never wanted to kill anyone—but also for what was required afterward: disposing of the corpse and anticipating the consequences.

In Jonah's past, he was afraid not only of being alone, but also of wanting to be. Since then, as an older person and a man, he'd evolved. But there was another part of him that he was afraid would take over, a much older version

of himself who was forced to be alone, absolutely hated it, but was also capable of killing anything or anyone he perceived as a threat.

Until somebody was clearly dangerous, they shouldn't be treated that way. He could and would think however he wanted, but he needed to remember to tread carefully in how he acted. It would be very easy for him to stalk every person traipsing through his perceived territory, treat them as an enemy, and eliminate them before they even knew what was happening. But that would be unwarranted, and one of the destinations for such behavior was seclusion. Possibly madness.

Aside from all the existential preoccupations that rattled around in his head constantly—and endlessly—Jonah was mildly annoyed because he never wanted to freely relinquish an opportunity to kill a rabbit. One of the best things about the area was the growing abundance of rabbits, and ignoring an easy shot to pursue a trespasser was a wasted opportunity to bring home more meat.

Jonah had already been inconvenienced enough today, and that was aside from the disruption of an unforeseen hunt. It wasn't as if he would have missed the shot he would have taken with his silenced pistol. Then again, Jonah wouldn't have gone back out in the first place if he wasn't presently tracking more trespassers.

Losing patience, Jonah headed around a tree and stepped directly into the man's path. He thought of greeting him in German, but that hadn't gone so well the last time. Instead, he said, "Howdy."

This surprised the man, but he didn't say anything. He was clearly startled, and his dry, cracked lips parted to speak except no words came out. Instead, he glanced at Jonah's hands, clearly looking for a weapon, but Jonah had only unsecured the clasp on the holster beneath his left arm thus far. He'd cut a hole in the holster for the silencer long ago, just for a scenario such as this one, and he'd also left the silencer attached to the pistol from when he was dealing with the man Doreen had shot. It was ready to be drawn out, quick-draw style, something he'd practiced a thousand times.

Jonah was in a position he never really thought he'd be in again, even though he was prepared to be. Running into other people had eventually become as much a fantasy as moving somewhere safer than the cabin. But to survive, all contingencies needed to be considered, no matter how far-fetched. Jonah didn't want to have to kill him if he didn't have to. At least not right away. He needed to find out more about him and his group and determine their threat level.

That level was currently very high because of the man's silence and the shotgun ready to rise and fire at any moment. He also wore a large, ragged backpack. It looked empty but was probably ready for filling. Jonah noticed a desperation about him, a weakness—maybe he was exhausted, that was probably what it was—as if he hadn't eaten in days, and he looked like he was about to keel over or just needed to sit down.

There was something else . . . Jonah couldn't quite put his finger on it until he saw something he recognized. He couldn't be sure, but the man looked to be a drinker. Jonah knew this because he used to be one, and there were certain tells: visibly flushed cheeks over unkempt facial hair, puffy face, glassy eyes, a certain irritated swagger. He had likely drunk an entire bottle of booze yesterday.

Gesturing his head toward the shotgun, Jonah said, "On a hunt?"

"Yes."

"What are you hunting for?"

He hesitated. "Birds."

"Not many around here. I hear them but hardly see them. You been through this way before?"

"No."

His English sounded as if he were from the West Coast, as American as Jonah was, probably as American as the other dead man at the cabin. He was wary of Jonah, probably thinking he was a threat, as Jonah would also think of himself. Jonah was doing his best not to present himself that way, but he wasn't sure how well it was working. Difficult to get information out of somebody who was afraid, but Jonah didn't have a reason to get tough with him yet. He only had his suspicions.

Except it wasn't as if the present day would create rational and civilized people. It likely twisted them into irrational, desperate, and savage animals obsessed with their own survival, so until he proved otherwise, Jonah would think of him that way. Except he would act as if he didn't think those things. If he could.

Holding up his hands to seem as nonthreatening as possible, or as if he couldn't easily reach under his arm where the holster was located and pull and shoot his pistol before the man could aim and fire that shotgun, Jonah said, "I don't come across others very often." *Not at all, actually.*

"You must live nearby?"

"Yes. You?"

"Yeah."

"But you're not from here. Originally, I mean."

"No. Looks like we got something in common," he said, and smiled a smile that looked like it took effort, was even painful. Seeing his dehydrated, dry, and cracked lips, it was as if he hadn't smiled genuinely in years.

"That we do," Jonah said. "Funny how that's possible with things how they are."

"Where are you from?"

"California. You?"

"Montana."

Jonah felt himself grin. It was nice to converse about America with anyone. It made him realize how much healthier he was now as a person. Not too long ago, a little girl's game talking about what everyone missed had

caused him to go for a run in the dark and danger of night.

"What brought you to Germany?" Jonah said.

"Vacation. What about you?"

"Vacation too."

Their breath clouded the air as both men thought of what to say next.

"Seen any of *them* today?" Jonah said.

"Last night. Not today. Not yet."

Good. That was what Jonah always wanted to hear. "Nearby?"

"No."

He might actually give up some info easily, Jonah thought. Jonah wanted to ask him just how far he'd traveled already, but he didn't want to push him too much. Jonah wanted to make it seem as if he was making polite conversation. Between strangers. "You drive here?"

"Yeah. On foot too."

Definitely out scavenging for supplies. *Why else?* Whether he was decent —as Jonah had been years ago, searching for anything of use that no one owned anymore because they were gone or missing or dead—had yet to be determined. "Any idea how far they've spread?"

"Everyone has an idea."

"What's yours? What have you heard?"

"All kinds of rumors."

Getting anything out of civilians is like pulling teeth. "Like what?"

"They're everywhere."

Unfortunately, that seemed to be the consensus. The more Jonah heard it, the more he believed every landmass was potentially infested with Molters depending on the availability of hosts. He'd accepted that two years ago. Especially after what he'd discovered about the Behemoths, how they could form—be born—practically anywhere. One thing he didn't know was if it could happen in all climates.

It would be great if Behemoth cocoons were repelled by white sand beaches or any other places that were sunny and warm or considered comforting vacation destinations. Going somewhere like that was a fantasy Jonah kept in the back of his mind, something to work toward, work for, if it were still possible. He'd love to take Doreen to some resort on a beach, any one of them, and relax in the sun and be healthy enough—have the control—to enjoy some drinks while watching the waves. Hopefully one day, he thought.

Existence for all humans seemed to be reverting back to when they had first emerged from the jungle. As dangerous as it had been for mankind during the Stone Age, and similar to how it had been for them—man's prehistoric ancestors—everyone was ready to fight to survive. Or even become violent at any time. The stranger had no idea who was standing before him, had no idea how well Jonah was trained.

"Just the mention of a place near home makes me homesick," Jonah said as

casually as possible.

"Me too."

"Where do you live now?" Jonah waited, but he only stared back at him. "Where's home?"

The man wasn't being defiant in his silence, but he seemed to be waiting for something, as if it was for Jonah to say goodbye or give him permission to leave. If it were Jonah in his position, he would have walked away already or threatened him with that shotgun or even pulled the trigger if need be.

It also seemed like somebody else was in charge because he was behaving like an underling. It was only a gut feeling, but Jonah was hardly ever wrong.

"Where do *you* live?" he said.

"I asked first," Jonah said, keeping his figurative mask on, the one he had to force himself to wear on occasion so it could offer a friendly smile.

"I don't think where we live matters anymore."

"Why's that?"

The man shrugged. "Everything changes too much."

"What do you mean?"

"People. You seem like a good guy. To be honest, I haven't talked to anybody new in a while." He stared at Jonah for what seemed like a minute. "Fuck it . . . this is a while back, when we started off with a guy we all liked. Sawyer. Natural leader. Everything was going well. As well as it could with how things were. There were about ten of us then . . . no, eleven—no, ten. That's right. Artem, he passed away around that time."

He cleared his throat and seemed to be collecting his thoughts.

"After about a month, I heard yelling. Popped my head out of my tent to see what was going on. It was daytime, but it's never wise to make so much noise. I'm sure you know what I mean. There's part of me thinks they sleep during the day mostly but somehow remember what they hear. Then they hunt us down at night."

"Is that what happened?"

"I don't know. I'm probably just getting paranoid. They're just too good at hunting us."

"I meant was that the cause of the noise?" Jonah said. "Were you being attacked?"

"We were always getting attacked, but not during that argument and not by them. See, Sawyer called the shots, told us what to do, where to go, how far we were going each day. And he always had a few of us behind him, enforcing what he said. But we kept getting killed. We kept dying."

The man said *we* a lot, so it seemed he wasn't on his own much during the Molting and obviously had lost people. Sorrow was human. Better to encounter someone with feelings of loss or regret than just an empty shell of a person. Better that than a killer who wasn't interested in conversation.

"Then he was practically isolated and would only emerge from his tent to give orders before staying inside it all day and night. But then . . . eventually,

they jumped him."

"They kill him?"

He nodded. "I turned briefly. Wished I hadn't. Saw him get hit over the head with a rock. A *rock*. You believe that? Something so small could drop somebody as smart and strong as Sawyer?" He shook his head. "They thought he was going nuts. Probably was. Before they could think about doing the same to me, I left."

"They were going to kill you too?"

"I don't know. Maybe. Maybe not. I just didn't want to be with them anymore. Everything got too fucked up. Our social structure broke down. No way we could be strong anymore, not with Sawyer dead. None of us could replace him."

The wet of condensation was sticking on his beard, contrasting with his blue, chapped lips as he stared through Jonah. He had been shivering since he began his story, but Jonah got the feeling it wasn't only from the frosty temperature.

"Maybe it's just the cold, or my patience isn't what it used to be," he said, "but you look like a man who has what all men want."

"And what's that?"

"You know. Maybe you could . . . share."

"Share what?"

"I've been out here a long time."

"These woods?"

"No." He squinted. "*You know* what I mean."

Jonah had no idea what he was talking about. "I'm afraid I don't."

He exhaled without trying to hide his annoyance. "I need what all men do. Nothing like the warmth of a female to make all this winter go away. At least for a while."

"It's spring."

"Bullshit. It's going to be winter until the day I die. That's what it seems like, anyway. Keeps a man cold. Nothing like some pussy to warm a man, don't you think?"

"No women where you're from?"

"Sure there are, but not for me. That kind of thing is . . . delegated." He waited. "No man is as healthy as you without the care of a good woman, and you seem like you haven't gone without care your whole life. I got things. Money. American money. I can trade. Whatever you want."

Jonah's anger had been rising with every word the man said since he said "share," but he hid it well. "The one in charge of you know you're out here for that?"

His lips puckered as if he'd just tasted something bitter, and his brow furrowed. "We ain't out here for that . . . I make my own decisions. Nobody's in charge of me. I just agree to go along when we go out. You understand?"

We again. "Sure."

The shotgun raised up a few inches. “Look, man, I’ve been fucking nice. Talking, telling you things about myself. Being generous with personal information and all that shit we’re supposed to do to be normal. All I ask is . . . I just *need*. I know you know what I mean. I’ll give you whatever you want. Hell, I’ll give you whatever you want from my friends too.”

Jonah stared at him in disbelief. All benefit of the doubt was over. It was clear what type of man the man was. He was the type not to be trusted, who was turning savage whether he knew it or not, just as Jonah was sure the man Doreen had killed at the cabin had been. “Can’t help you.”

“*Please*.” When Jonah’s demeanor remained, his eyes narrowed angrily. “You got to ask me some things; how about I ask you something? Where’s your place? Obviously close to where we are now.”

“What makes you think that?”

“Because you’re acting like somebody who’s got something to hide and protect and doing a piss poor job of acting like he doesn’t! That’s fucking how!”

Jonah had hoped, naïvely, that somehow he was harmless. That everything his gut was telling him about the man had been wrong. But Jonah wasn’t wrong. He was never wrong about people. Not any time he could remember. When he met Henry, who had shot at him, Jonah could tell he was decent.

The man before him now wasn’t decent. He was a piece of shit who wanted to find out where the cabin was located, kill Jonah, then raid the place and worse, and bring everything he could back to his community, to please whoever was in charge. Before that happened, he would do terrible things to Jonah’s people. Because it didn’t matter anymore, Jonah decided to say whatever he wanted to get the responses he needed to learn the information he required.

“Why so interested in where I live?” Jonah said.

“Why do you think?”

“Because you’re a savage. Probably a rapist. And a low-down, piece-of-shit fucking looter.”

The man’s eyes widened but his stare got as icy as the melting snow around them. His grip tightened on the shotgun. “I’m just out here minding my own business—”

“Alone.”

“I’m not alone.”

I know. I just wanted to make sure that you knew that I knew. “I don’t see anyone else.”

His words had grown cowardly, but his grip on that shotgun had turned much more hostile. His finger inched toward the trigger.

“How large is your community?”

The man said nothing.

“How many out here with you? I want a number.”

The man only stared back at him, clearly contemplating what to do next.

"The only reason you haven't shot at me is because you think I have what you want. If you kill me, well, you'll never find it. You got a pathetic desperation about you. For what you want personally. But there's something else. You need to please your boss."

The man swallowed, and he looked frightened all of a sudden, as if he wasn't used to confrontation or having his thoughts exposed. Or not having the power. "You shut your mouth."

"Or what?"

"Or . . ." He raised the shotgun up further. His finger was on the trigger now. "What do you think, man?"

Jonah just wanted to see what he'd do, see what he was made of by way of some harsh words. He probably hadn't done much killing of his own kind, but all men could be dangerous, and an armed stranger appearing out of nowhere with ill intent was definitely that. Especially to Jonah because he was so close to the cabin.

Though difficult to find and hidden well within the denseness of trees, it wasn't as if running across the cabin was impossible—as the dead man feet away from its porch had proved—and there was an old road that practically led straight to it. Things were going to be very different for Jonah and his people from now on, in terms of their treatment of danger levels. They would remain that way until they left the cabin, which was going to have to happen a lot sooner than Jonah had anticipated, according to his inner radar.

"You're brave to talk that way to me," he said, raising the barrel of the shotgun with his non firing hand, "seeing as I have this."

When the barrel was high enough, Jonah reacted quickly. He'd already reached into his unzipped jacket with his right hand and withdrawn his silenced pistol.

Thwack-thwack-thwack.

A bullet hit the man in the head, and the other two hit him in the neck as he fell backward. The snow crunched when he landed, then turned red with blood. The outskirts of the red snow changed to pink.

A snapping sound caused Jonah to turn quickly and raise the pistol.

His hand was shaking, he noticed, the 9mm trembling. That never happened after killing a Molter. His nerves were the result of killing a person, and once again he remembered he hadn't had to do that since the war. Before everything changed.

The sound he heard was probably the result of his hypervigilance, a twig or branch breaking where he couldn't see clearly, maybe under the corpse as it settled. Everything seemed to echo slightly in a forest.

Jonah looked down at the body. Jonah hadn't wanted to kill him, but he was about to fire the shotgun in his direction. If the shot hadn't killed Jonah, then the blast might have brought his friends. And as far as Jonah was concerned, a weapon aimed was a weapon intended to be fired. To Jonah and his people, all weapons were loaded.

Because there were obviously more looters in the woods, it seemed he might have to pull the trigger again no matter how he felt about having to do it, so he needed to get himself ready. They had probably all arrived together but likely spread out to cover more ground. A mistake on their part. People should travel in twos or a few more, never solo.

Unless you had training, were an ex-soldier but also an expert at hunting down and killing Molters. That applied to hunting down people as well.

Eventually, they would try to regroup, which would be impossible now as two of them were dead. Jonah needed to deal with them before they tried to no avail. He lifted and then kicked the corpse over with his boot, wondering what was inside the backpack. Maybe something of use like intel about where he came from? He bent down and quickly searched through it. Empty. He grabbed the dead man's shotgun and pumped it multiple times, each *crunch* ejecting a shell that he placed in his cargo pockets.

The shotgun shells were the same gauge as his favorite, the weapon he had equipped with a silencer, his preferred method for taking out Molter nests whenever he came across them. Even though that hadn't happened in a while. He liked his own shotgun better, of course, so he would use the shells for his weapon but keep the shotgun as another backup. In the cellar, or bury it somewhere. He could decide later.

Glancing back, Jonah decided to leave him as he fell. A body count was starting to pile up, and unless he decided to bury him, nature would take care of it. If the body were to be discovered, hopefully it would be by a Molter and not by anyone from the community he had belonged to. He might return to bury the corpse—he would have to deal with the one at the cabin somehow—but only if he didn't have to kill anyone else.

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CHAPTER 5

Once again, Jonah was reminded that he might need glasses. Even after squinting, it was difficult to count the bright smudges of clothing. Not only because his eyesight was weakening, but also because they were moving, and he had to move frequently to keep up. Not so easy to remain silent, and any slipup could inadvertently give him away. It was amazing one hadn't already because Jonah had actually been conversing with the man he'd killed.

Based on how careless the ones Jonah had dealt with already were, the others likely hadn't been in the military either, otherwise he would have had to deal with them already. Still, no one should be underestimated; they were all likely armed, and those without much experience with weapons tended to have itchy trigger fingers, especially if they discovered new supplies they wanted to protect. Holding the recently obtained shotgun in his left hand near his waist and his pistol at the ready in his right, he slowly took steps closer.

Because all his focus was on the new threats—after eliminating the one behind him—he allowed anything out of the ordinary to enter his senses: smells, sounds, footprints, newly fallen or broken branches, anything that would keep him on their trail. Of course, they were heading where he didn't want them to, but he didn't believe they were making their way toward the cabin on purpose. Probably going in that direction because it was slightly uphill, tapping into a natural human instinct that punishment would be rewarded.

They were only exploring, likely thinking they were as alone as Jonah had thought he and his people were until only recently, and it was possible they might pass by. They could also be decent. Just because two of them were threats didn't mean they all were. But based on what had happened at the cabin and what he had just had to do, but also what his gut told him, he would likely have to squeeze the trigger again.

But only if I absolutely have to.

There was a *snap* so close to him that it almost made him jump. It sounded like a tree branch breaking, and then it was followed by laughter. One of them had obviously fallen, and the rest stopped to help him up and also thought it was funny. Humor for them but an unexpected advantage for Jonah because it meant they had slowed down, and he closed the distance. Their extraneous noise had allowed him to move with a purpose.

Except he still didn't know the exact number of people he was dealing with or where they intended on going. If they changed direction, he could deviate from a confrontation and instead of heading right toward them, which he was doing now, he would hike ahead and far past them, hoping they would return to where they'd come from. Except sooner or later they would realize that some of their group was missing and go searching the area. Jonah wasn't sure

what to expect when that happened.

It didn't seem like any of them had radios; the dead two didn't, and Jonah hadn't heard any either. If they did have them, the man who'd stumbled across the cabin and trucks would have informed the others before he'd been killed by Doreen. Not having radios was a mistake on their part. Then again, their lack of training also likely trickled down to their lack of proficiency at searching. Not only was Jonah good at these skills, but he also had a nose for finding precious supplies. Clearly, they did not.

They probably all planned on meeting at a designated location. They had also made the mistake of separating, and because of that, it would take them a while to locate their missing members. Not even because of what Jonah had done; it would be because of their carelessness, and that would give him the time to return to the cabin, get his people somewhere safe, and pick off the trespassers if they appeared. Then he would bury them or leave them where they fell . . .

But he was getting ahead of himself. Even though he always liked to have a backup plan.

Their meandering course through the slush allowed Jonah to get so close to them that he could see their brightly colored winter jackets clearly. Their path was definitely erratic, but they were still heading toward the cabin somehow. That was unfortunate for them. Their clothing obviously kept them warm, but it was so bright they could probably be seen from orbit. Something else Jonah would use to his advantage, to keep his eyes on them.

Other than the cabin being out in the open enough to be in sight once you were near it, the few trails leading to it—other than the main dirt road—were among its few weaknesses. They'd stumbled upon one of those trails. He would have to intercede soon.

The men—Jonah could see them clearly now; there were three of them, and there weren't any women among them, thankfully—were picking up the pace. He would always do whatever was necessary, but he never wanted to have to kill any women. Three plus two equaled five—two dead, three still alive, walking and talking—and a group of five was relatively small. He wasn't sure, but there were likely multiple groups of people out there somewhere, and they all probably belonged to the same community. It was the way they were going about things, far too confident to be wary.

They were so desperate to find supplies or whatever it was they were searching for that none of them had noticed they were being followed, and they were behaving as if they had no idea that two of their own were even missing. Jonah was dealing with common folks with survival experience—they were still alive, after all—but definitely no training. The disadvantage was that people like that were more apt to do something stupid that could jeopardize the lives of everyone in a potential confrontation, especially Jonah, so he would remain cautious.

Then, to Jonah's disbelief, they actually broadcast their intentions. One of

them started raising his voice even more, practically shouting, and talked about getting whatever they could, and when one of them asked what they should do if they saw anybody, one of them, who was probably in charge of the three, said to kill anybody they didn't know. Anyone who wasn't one of them. So, because they'd verbally expressed their immoral intent, Jonah charged them. He didn't care if they spotted him now.

Jonah was sure he could handle all three of them with the bullets in just one pistol magazine. Two were dressed in bright orange hunting jackets, one a blinding yellow. When they turned in his direction, Jonah saw that they all had beards. They instinctively raised their hunting rifles, but Jonah shot two of them in the head with silent *cracks*. Both their heads snapped back, and their bodies slumped to the ground.

The other man dropped his rifle. It clattered to a bare spot of dirt as the others lay around him. He raised his hands. "Don't shoot!"

Jonah nearly had shot him. Instead, and because of his demand, Jonah faltered and merely aimed the silenced 9mm, but at his nose, the trigger ready to be depressed and make him as dead as the others. "Get on your knees!"

The man's mouth hung open; he was speechless and clearly in shock, but he did as he was told, kneeling. Jonah would have had the same stunned reaction if he had had to watch people he'd known die right in front of him. Around the corpses, blood rivers ran all over the icy, slushy snow.

"Wait!" he said, hands shaking. "I didn't do nothing!"

"How many more friends you got?"

"Why'd you do that?"

"How many?"

He hesitated, breathing heavily. "You just killed 'em all."

"Answer honestly or you're next."

The man lowered his hands.

"No, keep those up."

He flung his hands back into the air. "I'm on my fucking knees!"

His face contorted into a question that seemed to be about what Jonah intended on doing. His eyes darted nervously from the pistol to the shotgun that Jonah held loosely in his left hand. Jonah placed the shotgun between his knees, pinching it there; grabbed the man's rifle off the ground; and threw the strap over his shoulder.

A little cumbersome having three weapons on him, not including his machete. As he stood up straight, an unloaded shotgun in one hand and loaded pistol in the other, and the man's rifle strap over his shoulder, he briefly considered what to do next. While doing that, he imagined what these people might have done had he not confronted them.

They would have gotten quiet upon discovery of the place he considered his home, wondering if the people who lived there were inside. One of them would have crept up close to a window but would have ducked after spotting Doreen or Heike or both of them, signaling to the others with a nervous hand,

envious of the warmth inside as they all tried to imagine what supplies might be in there for the taking. Everything someone as desperate as they were would need. And want.

Desperate to survive. It was all Jonah needed to know about him. Like the others, there was no way for Jonah to know what kind of man he was truly dealing with, who he was before the Molting, if he was good now or bad or somewhere in between. Most people were good, but Jonah couldn't take any more chances. The dead men had spoiled it for the only one still alive; their intent to raid and loot or worse made that clear, and far too close to his front door.

"Get up." Jonah motioned with the 9mm. "Start moving. Fast."

The man rocked and stood, his hands still raised. "Which direction?"

Jonah pointed. He did as he was told. Jonah followed him away from the bodies and onto one of the trails that would lead to the cabin, except now in the opposite direction.

"Do I have to keep my hands raised?"

"Walk faster."

He picked up the pace. "You have two guns. And mine."

It might be a mistake, but Jonah wanted him to walk as quickly as possible, so Jonah decided to allow it. Swinging arms helped with speed. "No, you can lower them."

The man dropped his hands as if they weighed a ton. "Thank you. So who are you, anyway?"

Jonah said nothing.

"You must live up here? We were too close to where you call home? That it? If so I'm real sorry. Real sorry."

He had said *up*, which meant he and his people didn't live near the present elevation. That probably meant substantial distance between Jonah and wherever they resided, which was good. Jonah may have very well ripped danger out by the roots. Temporarily. The real issue was when others—Jonah was almost positive they came from a larger group—eventually came looking for those who were missing.

"What's your name?" he said.

"I'm the one with the . . ." *Don't say weapons. Don't give any hint you were in the military.* "I'm the one with the guns. Just keep going."

"We were just looking for some food."

"Not all of you."

"It's true."

"You're a liar."

"Hey, man. Come on. You want to see my ribs?"

"How many more of you are there?"

"There were five. You probably killed the rest?"

He was actually telling the truth, and Jonah's attitude was the man's answer to that particular question. "I'm not talking about the ones you were

out here with."

"Um . . . I'm the last of them, I guess. How about you give me something to eat, and I'll just leave?"

"Even after what I did to your friends?"

"They weren't my friends."

"Sounded that way. All that laughter and grab-ass. I would have known where you were from a mile away. And you're leaving no matter what, so answer my question."

"I won't tell anybody you're up here."

I guarantee that. One way or another. "Where'd you come from?"

He was doing some plotting of his own because he didn't answer at first. "Are you going to kill me?"

"Not if you're not a threat."

"So, however I answer your questions will determine that?"

"Yes."

"You'll let me go after?"

"I want to."

"All right, I wasn't telling you the truth. I come from a larger group. But who doesn't?"

They kept walking, trampling across the slushy, half-frozen earth. The woods looked so impenetrable it was as if all the trees were connected at the bases but with various gaps, like a fence. He was leading Jonah now, but that was easy because he was just following the trail that had led him there. All Jonah cared about was that they were heading away from the place he considered home and at a quick pace. Whether he knew it or not, he was inadvertently getting closer to where he came from. Unless he brought it up, Jonah would continue to allow him to give up more intel.

"I'm not sure what you're going to do here, so you can probably understand my reluctance to say too much to a stranger who might do my other friends harm. I care about my people just as I'm sure you care for your . . . whoever."

"I thought you said they weren't your friends."

"I don't know why I said that, slipped out. Look, we're all strangers now. Those you killed, I didn't know them very well. Worked together a few times, but that's all."

Jonah understood how that worked. Most of the time, that was how it was; most were just acquaintances you knew for a while, worked with, had a few laughs with, and then that was it.

"We were ordered to come out here, so we did."

"OK," Jonah said. "Ordered by whom?"

"Well, not ordered exactly. We volunteered for it, but they decide when we go."

"Who decides?"

"Underling of the man in charge."

"What's his name?"

"What's yours?"

"I'm not telling you my damn name," Jonah said, "and I don't want to know—"

"I'm Doug."

Harder to be tough with somebody once you knew their name, Jonah thought. Doug did seem different than the others. Maybe he was actually telling the truth. Jonah had worked with plenty of people he hadn't agreed with or even liked. Just got his work done and went home when he had a regular job, or back to his cot whenever he could while he was deployed. But then again Jonah had begun to trust the first guy he had to kill, too, before he'd mentioned women.

"You don't have to tell me who you are, that's fine, but before I start telling you things, I want to know what you plan on doing afterward."

"That depends on you."

They had made their way from the cabin to make Jonah feel relaxed enough to ease up his tension and were just stepping over a rise when Doug tripped. Seconds later, it was apparent he had only pretended to stumble because he unexpectedly lunged backward, knocking Jonah over.

Well, can't trust the lot of 'em. Shit!

The shotgun slipped out of his hand, and the rifle slung over his shoulder pressed awkwardly into his back when he landed. Jonah still held the pistol, but it was aimed at the gray sky, and that was when Doug leaped on top of him, trying to gain control of the weapon, something he had obviously planned to do the entire time. If Jonah were in his shoes, he probably would have done the same. Hard to be on the side of somebody who'd just killed the people you were with.

Jonah had let himself trust a stranger just long enough for something like this to happen. Not exactly his fault, even though later he would consider it to be, but also naïve of him. He wanted to be able to trust someone he didn't know. He definitely wasn't going to be able to trust Doug, if that was his real name, who was presently trying to wrestle the pistol away from him, nor should he have remotely trusted anyone else he'd come with.

Grabbing a clump of his greasy hair, Jonah tried yanking him upward far enough so he could get a shot at his face and end the fight, but that wasn't happening. Doug was stronger than he looked. He had given up on getting ahold of Jonah's 9mm and was reaching for the machete attached at Jonah's side instead. That was probably why Doug hadn't mentioned the machete. He'd also been planning on going after it the whole time.

Jonah shoved at his chest as hard as he could with both hands, rearing back and getting a leg in between them and then kicked Doug off him. Doug grasped for Jonah's pistol, but the silencer whisked through his fingers, and then he slipped in the snow and stumbled backward. His boots started sliding, and then he fell down the small hill.

Standing quickly, Jonah aimed as Doug did his best to awkwardly scramble to his feet, still slipping. Jonah shrugged the rifle strap off him and let it *clatter* to the ground. Jonah leveled the pistol, ready to shoot and end another life.

Whatever it takes, Henry.

Jonah recalled what Henry had said to him before leaving for the cabin, an agreement between them, and what Jonah was willing to do in order to protect his loved ones. Doug was about to receive a bullet from Jonah's silenced weapon for his deception, but then something strange happened. The tree above Doug began to move, almost as if there were a windstorm, as if it were coming to life, even though it was covered in snow.

It was something Jonah had seen before, a tree that wasn't a tree at all and only looked to be one, and he took hurried steps backward, still keeping Doug pinned in place with the aim of his pistol.

The look on Doug's face was one of confusion as he thought that maybe he was about to be spared. But then he slouched when he heard the groaning of the branches behind him, about to snap under the weight of something too massive and far too heavy to remain poised up in something as brittle as a tree weakened by winter.

Jonah peered upward to see what still looked like tree branches, which he knew were not, even though they blended in with the real ones all around them, and their movement gave away their life. It was something biological, steaming, and ready to strike. Jonah was momentarily fascinated by how well some predators were able to blend in with their surroundings. Turning—there was so little time—Jonah dove, rolling down the hill he and Doug had only so recently scrapped on top of.

The Behemoth dropped from above, instantly containing Doug in a cage of legs, and then he was gruesomely stabbed through his stomach by a tail equipped with a stinger. As he did his best to voice alarm, he was in the air and brought to its mouth. He shouted something when its large maw opened wide, a low growl emitting from somewhere deep inside its throat. Jonah couldn't make out what Doug had said, and it didn't matter because his brief pleading tone distorted into a scream. Then half of him disappeared into its bite.

The horror of what Jonah was witnessing made his heart hammer in his chest as if he were actually the one inside the creature's mouth. Goosebumps spread all over him and not because of the wintry surroundings. For some reason, he thought it was linked to one of his terrible nightmares, the meaning behind them, what some deep primitive part of his subconscious had been trying to tell him.

Cautiously creating more distance with each carefully placed backward step, Jonah held his 9mm at the ready, watching Doug's legs kick around outside the Behemoth's mouth, when he realized how much danger he was in and also how useless a pistol would be against a creature that size. Where

there were differences in the appearances of Molters, especially with the new strain of Infector bombs, Behemoths all looked the same to him: huge, with many legs; dark stripes that reached toward a pale face like a Molter's; large teeth; and that active stinger-equipped tail.

As what was happening before him registered—the Behemoth wasn't eating Doug, it was drinking him like a Molter would—those legs stopped kicking, and dangled as limply as a doll's. Jonah realized he didn't have much time, so he turned and ran as fast as he could. The rifle and shotgun were somewhere near the feeding zone, and there was still enough snow on the ground for them to remain hidden. He had no time to search for them.

And it wasn't as if an unloaded shotgun would do him much good, and he had no idea if Doug's rifle was even loaded. Both weapons were of no use to him at the moment—all three of them, if he counted his pistol. He couldn't very well outrun the Behemoth, so he needed to sprint. Easy to fall on such uneven terrain, but he had no choice. He remembered how fast they could scramble after somebody.

It remained silent behind him, but that was only because the dead man hadn't been completely drained yet. The Behemoth was still feeding. Jonah had made sure he and Doug were a good distance away from the cabin, but now that was unfortunate because he needed to get back and fast. There were far more weapons there. He knew it was a risk to lead the monstrosity home, but if he didn't rearm, it would get him. He wasn't sure how long, or even if, he could evade the creature out in the woods.

His confidence in his skills, practically weapons themselves, were all Jonah had on occasion, and he was still alive. He had to trust his instincts. He could do this. He pulled out the radio as he ran, wishing he didn't have to alarm Doreen this way.

What was I supposed to say to let her know there was trouble? He couldn't remember.

He thumbed the mic anyway. "Get inside!" In case Doreen was outdoors for some reason. "Incoming! Incoming! Incoming!"

The feeding was obviously over because the forest came to life at his back. It went from silence to a shit storm. What had been only the quiet of the trees recovering from the harshness of winter's chill transformed into a roar, one that sounded almost like desperation, as the creature on top of the food chain went after Jonah with everything it had and probably still very hungry.

Judging by all the crunching, snapping, and breaking noises, it obviously didn't care if there were bushes in its way or trees or even a brick wall. It intended on doing to Jonah what it had just done to Doug if it could get to him, and what it had done to that man was something Jonah had never seen a Behemoth do before.

His breath shot out in forceful gasps and not because of the shape he was in or that he was out of breath. He wasn't; he was in very good shape because of his daily exercise routine, but it was because of the shock of what he had

just witnessed. He would have to wrap his head around it later, if he was still alive, but what the hell did it mean? Was it better for people? Worse?

"Ah!"

He ran by a bush that seemed determined to reach out and scratch him. It was so rigid that the branches stung his arms even though he wore a jacket, as if it were frozen. A little pain was good, though, because it gave him a little extra adrenaline that helped him with his running speed. He just hoped he didn't trip and fall. If he did, he was a dead man.

The Behemoth was closing the distance behind him, he could hear it, and Jonah relished the day when he wasn't considered a potential meal. Doreen hadn't responded by radio when he yelled into his own, but he was positive she had heard him. Jonah wasn't the only one who was diligent with his duties.

The woods went from a swirling blur to recognizable as the foliage peeled back and opened up. There was smoke in the sky, remnants from a fire in the woodstove before everything went wrong when the stranger found the cabin. Jonah was so close. The familiar outline of walls and a roof appeared through the brush and between the trees, the pleasant familiarity of home, parked trucks, but then the dead man on the ground.

The cabin door was cracked open. He considered requesting the rocket launcher, but the fight was about to be too close quarters for that kind of weaponry. Explosives were too unpredictable, especially with the nearby trucks. Which to choose . . .?

"My rifle!" he yelled.

Shooting past the bluing corpse, he grabbed the weapon Doreen was ready to hold out to him as if she'd read his mind before he decided. Doreen's rifle had a scope mounted permanently, pointless for the short range of the incoming danger, and his did not. He turned and lunged off the porch, hearing the door slam shut behind him. He needed to aim carefully, or he was about to be stabbed through by the Behemoth's tail, raised to its large and sharp-tooth-filled mouth, and then drained.

Jonah had always thought it would be a Molter that finally drank his blood. Never once had he thought it would be a Behemoth.

Understanding their behavior because of all the times he'd faced them and betting it was already closer than he expected, Jonah shifted where its path had been and aimed his rifle to the left. Then right, understanding how they typically attacked: making noise on their main path only to sneak around and surprise their prey where they wouldn't be expecting.

The creature stalked Jonah to his right, low to the ground, making itself look smaller than it actually was. Hard to do that once in view, and it seemed to realize that, so once it knew it was spotted, it rose up to its full height with pride, dwarfing the cabin as if it were only some scale model, roared, and rushed Jonah as if he were an adversarial Behemoth threatening its territory. He hoped it wouldn't trample either of the trucks.

The sight of it terrified him, no matter the number of times he'd faced them, with its many long, tree-length legs scurrying all at once like a giant spider. Its pale head, similar in appearance to that of a Molter of the original strain but much larger, its mouth open and long teeth bared, ready to snap onto Jonah with its steel-trap bite. Jonah squeezed the trigger, and a high-caliber round smashed into its forehead, causing it to lurch forward and fall in a heap of tumbling, twisting legs.

Hoping that one shot might have been enough to do it in but reflexively practicing the opposite, Jonah recocked the rifle and waited, ammo conservation always on his mind regardless of the arsenal at his disposal.

But he watched as the thing struggled back onto its many clawed feet and struggle onward, blood trickling from the head wound and down its face. It would die from the gunshot eventually but might be able to grab him and drain him before that happened. And if it knew who else was inside the cabin only feet away . . .

Doreen wasn't in sight, but she was surely a witness to what was going on and, armed within the safety of the cabin, ready to join the fight if necessary. She would do her best to save him if she had to, Jonah knew, but he would do his best to end this before endangering anyone else. Jonah fired again and again and again, recocking as fast as he was able to between each pull of the trigger, every bullet smashing into it with sickening crunches through its firm flesh and bones, and he was thankful for his aim.

The Behemoth finally collapsed to the ground only feet away from him, seconds away from grabbing him to do what they did, possibly destroying the trucks or even the cabin had it not died. But thankfully it was now dead, steam rising from its blood and exposed insides. It had been waiting in those trees a long time to feed. Desperate, hungry, and struggling to survive.

"Like all of us, fucker."

Upon closer inspection, he couldn't tell where the other bullets had hit it. Somewhere center mass as he hadn't wanted to waste a shot going for the head with it so close. He looked over at the door to see it was open again, Doreen cautiously leaning out. She had probably been watching from one of the windows. He put his finger to his lips, pointed two fingers at his eyes and then one at the trees. She nodded, shut the door, and locked it. She knew what he meant. There might be more.

More what, though? Behemoths? Molters? People? Which were the biggest threat?

Seeing that the dead Behemoth was no longer a threat—or moving—and definitely dead, Jonah took careful steps forward, still ready to fire again no matter how positive he was of its demise. Guns were dependable weapons, but he was always ready to pull his machete or yank that ax off the chopping block.

Upon closer inspection, he saw that the Behemoth looked old and wrinkled, paler than normal even. It wasn't as shriveled up as the dead one

he'd seen recently, but it also didn't look healthy. It was probably one of the older ones that was born around when the Molting began. It must have been very desperate—maybe even close to death itself—to drink Doug the way it had, then attempt the same thing with Jonah, which meant there were no Molters serving it to become its food.

That wasn't exactly a shock. Jonah hunted all the creatures daily—except for the occasional day off on a Sunday to coincide with a day off from exercising—but even when he wasn't clearing, he was constantly on the lookout for lone Molters or packs of them. Still, this was the second Behemoth he'd seen recently, counting the one that was already dead when he found it—that looked like it had been fed upon—and he hadn't had such a battle with a Behemoth since before Henrytown.

"Is it dead?" Heike said from an open window.

Jonah turned, a little startled by her young voice being so on edge. "Yes. Shut that, please."

"But it's dead. You said so."

"Danger not over, sweetie."

"OK."

He heard the window slide shut as he turned back around. *What to do with it?* He hated the idea of any corpse being so close to the cabin but especially one the size of a Behemoth. Using it as a repelling tactic against Molters, as was done at Henrytown, was no longer reliable. And it wasn't as if the temperature dropped below freezing right now, so the corpse would decompose and begin to stink very soon. Then there were the other bodies. He wasn't looking forward to what had to be done, but he wanted to get it done and behind him.

Waiting another ten minutes and continuing to scan his surroundings, he eventually pulled out the radio and said, "All clear."

The door unlocked with a well-lubricated *click* and opened. "Want some lunch?" Doreen said.

Turning away from all the death, Jonah forced himself to be normal again and not just some new evolution of person requiring the ability of extreme violence at the drop of a hat to survive. He forced himself to be who they knew him to be. And who they wanted him to be.

"Sure," he said, as upbeat as possible. Except there was that part of him that was still active; the one with the radar that knew it was time to hunt and clear would not turn off. "But first I'm going back out for a while."

"You said all clear," Doreen said.

He was mentally still in mission mode. He hadn't cleared enough, obviously. "Gotta be sure there's no more of them. Collect weapons I left behind." The shotgun and Doug's rifle he dropped. He also remembered the other dead men had both been carrying hunting rifles. "I won't be gone long. Why don't you get lunch ready, and I'll be back shortly."

"OK," she said. "What about those?"

He glanced at the dead man, then at the bloody, giant monstrous ruin with multiple black legs and a long tail. “I’ll deal with it later. After lunch.” Jonah ran up on the porch, handed her back his bolt-action rifle, and gave her a quick peck on the lips. “Love you.”

“Love you too,” she said.

Jonah trotted to Henry’s truck, unlocked it, and grabbed the automatic rifle on the driver’s seat. He waved to Doreen. She had a look on her face as if she’d never see him again, and Jonah realized he’d seen that look too many times to count.

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CHAPTER 6

Doreen had made sandwiches: meat from a can and bread she'd made over the fire in the woodstove a few days ago. Before returning, Jonah had meticulously combed through the area surrounding the cabin for just under an hour to ensure there was no longer an immediate threat. Long enough to have some lunch at least. It was probably a bit strange to have lunch as a family after what had happened, but that's how it was since the Molting. They weren't about to give up on life, on being normal, or at least doing their best to pretend to be, but still, it was anything but. During the time he'd patrolled, he had pondered the Behemoth.

"Never seen them do that," Jonah said.

"It probably doesn't happen very often," Doreen said. "Or it's the first time. It's possible, and you were the witness. Who can be sure?"

"Oh, I doubt it's the first time. I'm just wondering what it means."

"What you already know. They're changing, and a Behemoth . . . doing what it did is probably like us eating raw meat. We are capable of it, but it isn't preferred. Eventually, we'll get sick. I don't think it could live that way for long."

"But what if it could? What if they can? Maybe that's what's next for them. If the Molters are evolving, why not the Behemoths too?"

The Behemoth had fed on someone directly, which meant there weren't any Molters to cocoon to become its food. Or the Molters were unwilling. Had made a choice. A chilling thought. Whatever the reason, it was obviously a last resort for it. A last-ditch effort to survive. Perhaps that was how it would be from now on, with Molters and Behemoths surviving independently of one another. If that were true, then it was also possible—and also likely—for them to become enemies, competitors for the same food source: blood.

That was especially probable because Infectors could be born the same way as Behemoth spores, gestating within a Molter, an Infector bomb, and Behemoth bombs might not even exist anymore. Frightening to think of all the Infectors that were born from just one Infector-ridden Molter. Dozens at least, sometimes more, and if there were millions of those Molters, those Infector bombs . . .

"How about we talk about it after we've finished eating?" Doreen said, and smiled at him, obviously reading his mind.

"Or not at all," Jonah said. "We don't have to."

"But maybe you need to."

"I suppose it can help to think out loud every so often."

"Especially for you. You have so much going on upstairs." Doreen tapped her temple with her pointer finger. "And I'll listen to you if you want, but for now, let's enjoy the meal I worked *so* hard on preparing."

Jonah exhaled and grinned at her. “All right.”

“What did it do?” Heike said, chewing, obviously having understood some of their conversation.

“It doesn’t concern you,” Doreen said.

Before sitting down to eat, Jonah had whispered in Doreen’s ear what had happened because, although they were both honest with Heike to make her strong, she didn’t need to know everything, especially if it was just more of the same. The human threats were a different kind of danger, but there was a time and a place, and disturbing a little girl’s lunch with gruesome details of battle was not one of them. Jonah had dragged the man’s body out of sight of their doorstep and would deal with it, and the rest of the carnage, the corpses of men and a beast, later.

Doreen eyed the food on Jonah’s plate. “Eat your sandwich,” she said to him.

Jonah mentally teleported back into the moment, and it was as if he was just now seeing the food. The aroma of it seemed to hit his nostrils at the same time: the sharp waft of bread and meat. His mouth was watering as he took a large mouthful, and it tasted so good, he closed his eyes.

“Did you bite the inside of your mouth?” Heike said. “I do that sometimes.”

“That’s because you eat too fast,” Doreen said.

Jonah politely held a napkin over his mouth. “It’s just plain old delicious. I guess I had no idea how hungry I was.”

“It’s because you were outside so much.” Doreen swallowed a bite. “You want another after that? We have enough.”

“Yes, ma’am. I do.”

“You want to make it, or do you want me to?”

“Will you make it, please? Sandwiches always taste better when someone else makes them. For some reason.”

“That’s because I put—”

“Don’t tell me. I don’t want to know.” It tasted like corned beef to him, but he wasn’t sure. For some reason, he liked that. “Keep it a mystery. If I know what’s in it, I’ll make it all the time, and we won’t have any food left.”

Doreen beamed. “I’ll take that as a compliment.”

Heike laughed, chomping loudly with her mouth open. “Wow, you are hungry.”

“Chew with your mouth closed, please,” Doreen said.

They were sitting at the dinner table, which was a nice piece of furniture Jonah had found in an abandoned house. It was bigger than the table that was already in here when they’d first arrived. It had been for someone who didn’t care about how things looked, had probably been a man, as Doreen had suggested, and had lived alone. There was hardly room for even one diner.

Except what Jonah had discovered in the nearby cave made him think otherwise, that there had been others, more than one person. Probably. There

were two small bedrooms. He had no idea who had lived at the cabin since it had been built but had realized it didn't really matter, so he didn't think about it much anymore.

Knowing they would live at the cabin for a while, Jonah had done his best to find chairs that matched the table as well. For some reason, they weren't in the house he'd found the table in. He remembered guessing they were probably used somewhere else to block a door. The main door hadn't held because it was wide open, the wind rifling through as it pleased, and there were no chairs anywhere in that particular house. He had no idea why.

"Good sandwich, Mom," Heike said, finishing hers, holding her hand over her mouth as she spoke. "Thank you."

"You're welcome," Doreen said, using a spatula to lay another freshly made sandwich from the counter on Jonah's plate. "And that's very polite. No one wants to see the food in someone else's mouth."

The way Heike's eyes squinted showed she was smiling behind her hand as she chewed and finished the last bite of her sandwich. "I'm stuffed!"

"Really good," Jonah said, standing briefly to kiss Doreen on the lips before she sat down. "Thank you."

She tittered and shrugged. "I'm so glad you both like them so much."

"May I be excused to go play?" Heike said.

"Take your plate to the counter first."

"OK." Heike carefully carried her plate to the counter as if she were balancing it on her head and then quickly walked out of the kitchen and flopped onto a blanket next to the warm stove.

There's just something about your woman making you a meal, Jonah thought. The comfort. The warmth that filled him had nothing to do with the enclosed fire crackling nearby. It was the warmth of bonding while dining. Knowing that was probably why Jonah had searched so hard for what felt like home, what they would all consider that to be. Their meals and quality time together would always be pleasant but also very different if they all just sat on the floor or used a cardboard box as a dinner table.

And he knew how much women appreciated an aesthetic that matched when it came to interior decorating. He had come across most of their furniture when he ventured outside what became his controlled perimeter, something he did a lot shortly after arriving at the cabin, but he hadn't gone out very far in a while. It hadn't been necessary, but he was edging closer to another mission of that sort, although he didn't need to worry himself about that right now. They had almost everything they needed. Anything more would be more of what they already had, and if they ever were low on what they actually did need, Jonah knew where to find it. But that didn't change what needed to be done soon. There was a different kind of mission in his immediate future involving a new home. It would be his duty to find it.

Doreen was abruptly up, clearing the table and then hand-washing some dishes used to make the meal. Jonah watched her, feeling their bond, wanting

it to last forever, and as she came back to the table to clear off the remnants of the lunch, she bent down and kissed him. Now that was something he always needed more of. He closed his eyes, enjoying the intimacy as long as he could, knowing it would be brief because Heike was nearby. They saved those longer kisses for when they were alone.

Closing eyes when kissing showed trust, and that's what he always did with Doreen, but when the kiss was over and he opened them, he saw her eyes were still closed, but he also saw something else past her, and he gently—but urgently—tugged her to the floor.

"Heike, stay where you are," he said.

Doreen opened her eyes, her entire face asking the question she wanted to verbalize, but she had recognized Jonah's tone.

"Get under the table," he said to her.

Doreen ducked her head under without question, and while Jonah was beside her, he pointed up at the kitchen window. When she turned, she did it slowly and saw what he had: a Molter with green skin—it was an Infector bomb, veins running all over it like erratic rivers—staring inside. Teeth lined the outside of its mouth, the sharp tips pointing inward toward the dark maw of its hunger for blood. It was peering inside the cabin, but it didn't seem to be looking at them directly.

"I don't think it sees us," Jonah whispered. "Don't move."

Most likely it had only been investigating the cabin, understanding that a structure was where its prey might dwell, or maybe it had even heard them from outside but wasn't aware of their exact location within the walls, and that was keeping it from getting inside. But only for the moment. If it wanted to get in, it would.

One aspect of Henrytown Jonah yearned for was the armed guards. Jonah couldn't very well patrol continuously, and he had just gone out recently to ensure safety and seen no hint of danger, but that didn't prevent a steady stream of expletives inside his head.

Where the hell did it come from?

He couldn't figure out how it had slipped through his clearing without seeing it firsthand, and that seemed impossible. He decided it wasn't, but also that it was possible for any predator to go where it wanted if it were determined enough.

Work to do. A forthcoming killing. Think about it later.

"Going to take care of it," he said. "I'll be quick. Don't go outside for any reason until I get back."

"Just make sure you do," Doreen said.

He kissed her and winked at Heike.

Heike winked back at him by scrunching up her whole face. Then Jonah belly crawled, staying under the view from the kitchen window. The Molter was no longer in sight but surely nearby. He stood once at the door, put his boots on, yanked his 9mm out of the holster hanging from the coat rack, and

quickly attached the silencer. He flicked the safety switch to the firing position and slowly opened the door with hardly a sound. He made sure the door always opened as silently as possible by oiling the lock and hinges once a week, just in case. That door barely made any noise at all, necessary for how things were but especially for what he was about to do.

It was out of sight, so as he moved, he held the weapon at the ready and tried to anticipate where it could be, hoping it wasn't on the roof—he looked up and down—and wondering if there were more of them and where they might be too. Most likely, it would head downhill since that's the way it seemed to be headed. He based that on where it had appeared.

The woods where he had tracked the men who needed to be dealt with were on the door side of the cabin, and the hill was on the back side where he'd killed Molters before. He wondered if the Molter—or Molters—had fed on the corpse of the man Doreen had killed. And what it thought of the dead Behemoth sprawled in front of the cabin. Perhaps both had drawn it in.

If there were more than one Molter, they were likely still hunting on the ground. They didn't typically take to the trees unless they were about to attack or in the midst of a battle. If there weren't any prey to pursue—Jonah always studied them before pulling the trigger when he could do it safely—they typically remained on foot—clawed feet that aided their climbing.

After stepping on the top of the hill, he didn't see it until he looked to the right; he also saw there was another one. There were two, and both of them were about to disappear into the trees. Following closely and as silently as possible, he was almost positive there were only a pair. Then again, he had been enjoying lunch with Doreen and Heike only minutes ago, confident there were zero and that they were safe. He was wrong on both accounts.

Ignoring his sense of déjà vu, for he'd had to kill some cousins of theirs a few months ago, he advanced on them fast, weapon aimed. Just as they processed that one of their prey was running at them, they managed to twist toward Jonah, but then there were two bullets in each of their heads, fired from his silencer-equipped pistol.

They fell at the same time and almost as quickly as Jonah had decided to move. They didn't even get the chance to snarl, howl, or decide which tree to climb and hide in to wait for an opportunity to drop onto him from above.

Both had green skin and wore ragged pieces of clothing that almost seemed like they were embedded in their flesh. Sometimes Molters were able to rip all human skin off but somehow remain partly clothed. Jonah always suspected it meant they had molted recently. Steam rose up from the bullet holes in their heads as blood leaked out. They were both the new strain, different from the original Molters in appearance but also likely Infector bombs. It was wise of him never to know for sure what he knew for sure, so he took out his machete.

After both their midsections were open gashes of a steaming, reeking stew of pale entrails and Infectors, he was positive.

So close to the cabin, he was deciding what to do with them. Allow them

to rot for a while after he killed the Infectors, or burn them now and bury them afterward? He had left the Molters he'd killed down the hill last winter to rot, figuring the stench of their deaths would act as a defense, and the decaying corpses certainly had prevented some from entering his territory. But as he'd thought before, doing so was no longer a way to completely thwart them.

His indecision was set aside when he heard a very familiar sound, the kind that caused instant alarm—what sounded like a bedsheet tearing—and then Doreen let out a bloodcurdling shriek. Doreen never screamed. Never. The fact that she had was jarring, even more so because he could actually hear her from outside the cabin. The only good thing about her muffled scream was that it meant she was still alive.

Doreen wasn't the type to stay hunkered down and hiding, not be looking out a window for trouble, so she obviously had seen something. Or maybe she only heard it? They were all familiar with such a terrible sound. Immediately running, he didn't even care if there were more Molters behind him.

See if they can get their claws into me while I'm on the run.

When he neared the cabin, he saw what he expected: another Infector bomb. A Molter he had missed. His clearings would be doubled, tripled even, if that's what it took. He could take short naps and count that as sleep. He'd stay up all night if he had to. Doreen could stand guard as he rested for short spells, and then he would resume a protective patrol throughout his perimeter. The details would be improvised, but no matter what, the missions were about to get amped, and they would be in addition to his eventual scouting mission. Hopefully then they could leave the cabin for good.

The Infector bomb must have stayed out of sight but also waited for Jonah to move away, a tactic, and had practically exploded all over the porch. There was so much stringy and shiny, steaming goop he had to ignore his urge to wretch. It was practically everywhere as if the thing had swallowed a stick of dynamite. No wonder Doreen had reacted. The front of the cabin was coated.

The first time they had encountered an Infector bomb was during the surprise attack at Henrytown, and one of the many Infectors born from the Molter had almost bitten Heike. Jonah didn't blame Doreen for remembering what such a creature was capable of and being so fearful. It was one of the times Jonah had been the most thankful he was a solid marksman as he'd killed any Infector that got remotely close to Heike. Today would be no different in terms of his shot prowess, this time with a pistol.

Steaming chunks of mucus dribbled down the support beams that held up the roof. There were Infectors swimming through the gunk as they climbed all over—where Jonah, Doreen, and Heike had stood too many times to count, thinking it safe—over the slats, up the door, and some were already on the roof.

Because Jonah knew how many Infectors gestated inside just one of them, he knew the others were out of sight already. They were fast once matured

and knew to hide. Hopefully, none had gotten inside the cabin. That wasn't likely because there weren't any openings he was aware of, and Doreen wouldn't open the door again until he gave her the all clear. Still, as was the theme lately, it was wise never to be sure.

"Any get in?" he said.

"No," Doreen said, muffled. "I don't think so!"

Jonah sized up the cabin, stepping back and giving himself some room for careful aiming. Infector bombs were the worst because their aftermath was so difficult to contain. Each had a various number of Infectors gestating inside them: around a dozen, even as many as twenty, and all of them needed to be destroyed as fast as possible. If they weren't, they could be anywhere. There could be a few up some trees, nestled near the outhouse, or even in the undercarriage of one of the trucks, waiting to eventually sink their tiny teeth into flesh. They could lie in wait for longer than he dared to think about.

He was a good shot with a pistol, but killing them with an automatic rifle would be even easier; if only he could blow them away without fear of shooting up the walls. Either of those weapon systems or, in a pinch, a lighter and canister of Doreen's hairspray, but he only had a lighter in his pocket, and he wasn't about to go searching for a way to kill them that could very well burn the cabin to the ground. He would have to worry about patching holes later.

"Get away from the door. Both of you go into Heike's bedroom and lay down on the ground."

Their OKs were muffled. After analyzing the number of creatures that looked like hand-size spiders in sight—ten moving around, but there always seemed to be more than could be seen—he began squeezing the trigger.

One shot, one kill for most of them. He did miss a few times, but he stayed far enough away that they couldn't leap onto him. He aimed carefully at the ones that weren't moving at all and trying to remain still, as most of them were, but there were others that seemed to understand their lives were in immediate danger—not a complicated mystery as the others were dying around them—and the ones still alive scrambled in random directions.

Forced to reload—because of having to kill two Molters minutes earlier—and after closing the distance with nearly continuous shots, he was pretty sure he'd gotten them all. That were in sight anyway.

Carefully, he peeked inside what was left of the corpse of the Infector-ridden Molter splayed out on its back. Its entire upper torso had ripped apart in ribbons, as if it had blown up from the inside, and flowered in uneven petals of bloody flesh. It was all still connected with thin, ragged ropes of skin holding it together but barely. Except for half the head, which had fallen off. It was a few feet away, tilted back, one eye open aimed at the sky, a jagged part of a jaw of teeth exposed, and looking very pleased with itself. Jonah couldn't tell what had happened to the other half of its head.

Even when they were dead, they looked murderous. Infector bombs just

came apart above the waist, as if they were formed in pieces at birth, yet they looked as if they could just as easily connect back together. After inspecting it longer, Jonah thought it looked as if it were melting. Something close to the liquefying Molters of the original strain did on the inside when they cocooned to become food for a Behemoth. That must happen after they served their purpose, but why hadn't it happened to the Molters in the cave he'd discovered? He must have disrupted their life cycle by killing them.

His brow furrowed as he realized what that could mean. If Infector bombs liquefied after birthing the Infectors that grew inside them, then there would be no trace of them in no time at all. Once again, he'd learned something else that was frightening about them. That could be a very good explanation as to why the earth was so barren of society, how people had practically vanished, yet the same world was so flooded with Molters.

Jonah wanted to put a bullet in the one splayed out before him because he was pissed off but also because there were so many pieces to choose from. It was frustrating, except there was never a good reason to waste ammo out of fear. But especially out of anger.

He shrugged. "Oh well."

Jonah shot what remained of the thing's head. A hole exposed pink flesh. It was definitely beginning the liquefying process, taking on a slick look that made it look wet, similar to the look of the cocoons a Behemoth fed on in its lair. The gunshot made Jonah feel somewhat better. Even though he knew better. But that feeling wouldn't last long.

"Done shooting!"

He heard footsteps behind the door. "Day hunters," Doreen said from inside. Although muffled, she couldn't hide the concern in her voice.

Jonah hid his concern as best he could. Seemed relying on Molters mostly hunting at night was definitely over. "Yes," he said.

"Get all of them?"

"I think so, but stay inside."

Jonah continued to scan the area, looking for any movement whatsoever. The roof still had some white on it, so if there were Infectors there, he would spot them relatively easily. There were none. The only movement was the wind pushing against tree branches above him and the bushes at their bases. He carefully grabbed the Infector bomb by the arm so it wouldn't come apart completely—except for half the head he'd taken his frustration out on by shooting—and dragged it around the corner of the cabin nearer to where the other Molter corpses were.

He jogged back and grabbed the head by the jaw, briefly wondering if it was a mistake doing so with his bare hand, but he decided that it wasn't—not every piece of them was infectious, he was certain of it, no matter his deepest fears—and then went over and threw it, adding to the pile of gore. For some reason, he was out of breath.

That confused him a little. Jonah was in terrific shape. Maybe it was the

added weight? Even though Molters didn't weigh that much. Half the weight of the people they were born from? He could only guess. He wasn't so curious that he would weigh the damn things. Just all strength and predatory instinct.

It's all right to be uppity after a battle, he reassured himself. He took a big inhale and exhaled slowly, calming himself. What to do with all the corpses?

It was one thing to put his own life in danger and quite another matter to endanger his people, so he always considered what was best for them. What would keep them safest? He couldn't very well rely on another blizzard to bury the evidence as he typically did, even though another one or two or ten snowfalls might be on the way. Like what happened last year.

Although the Infectors inside the Molters he'd cut open weren't mature enough to scurry off on their own he decided he would burn everything, even the remains of the Behemoth, before all the decaying stench permeated the mountains. Similar to going loud when he shot Behemoth cocoons from the ridges, the planned rarity of doing so, he would apply the same strategy with one massive burn to get rid of all the dead, including the dead people, no matter how much billowy smoke it would produce. Even though they'd had ill intent, the thought of destroying human remains made him feel sick. Handling the remains of the creatures and the remains of his own species were very different for him.

Using the remains of the creatures to repel others wouldn't work there, so a burning had to be done, and those people had made their choices. He wasn't going to bury them. They didn't deserve it. The strategy used at Henrytown had helped keep Molters away, but it wasn't consistent enough to be relied on. Maybe it was because it had only been Molter corpses near the cabin but not Behemoths? Jonah didn't want to chance it by experimenting. He decided that burning remains was what he would do from now on. Hopefully, he wouldn't have to do it again before they left the cabin for good.

When he walked back onto the porch, he rapped the back of his knuckles on the door, then said, "Stay inside. We gotta watch everything close for a few days. Extreme vigilance."

"Did you get them?" Heike said from within.

"I got 'em. Most of them, I think. If there's any more, I'll try and lure them out over the next couple of days by walking around and making myself seen."

"Yay!" Heike said, as if it were some kind of game.

That made Jonah feel sorry for her. He hated that all this was her normal. The close proximity of the creatures was even more concerning. There had never been an Infector bomb this close to the cabin during his watch. All those he'd encountered had been far enough away from it for him to feel in control. Unless they'd been close but passed by. Something very possible. What had just happened was too close of a call. Not just that but the other Molters, the starving Behemoth, and also those men. Too many threats.

Years ago, Jonah had conducted an experiment because he wanted to know if Molters could actually smell blood. It was a reasonable curiosity because

blood was their food, just as he would recognize the aroma of meat being grilled in a neighborhood. It would also make sense that Molters could sniff it out as some other predators did. He planted bottles of rabbit blood in hard-to-find places: in an abandoned burrow, up a tree, places like that, but they were all still there weeks later. What he'd learned was something to rule out and confirmed what he always suspected: that they hunted by sight, instinct, and relative scent proximity. The way they hunted was in addition to the mysterious way they somehow found one another to group together.

The state of the cabin was getting worse by the hour, and he needed to do something about it immediately. Do more than he typically did, which meant actually forgoing his instinct to stay put and fortify. Instead he would leave that responsibility to the other trained soldier living with him and finally go on the mission that would worry her the most.

Similar to the rarity of his rifle shots—going loud—on the ridges to shoot and destroy the Behemoth cocoons that formed, the exploratory missions upon first arriving at the cabin, and the forthcoming burning, he would leave for his most dangerous mission but return as quickly as he could. It was risky. He knew it needed to be done, but Doreen wasn't going to like it, even though she knew it was coming and even though it had been in Jonah's mission forecast for some time.

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CHAPTER 7

Not going past the perimeter for so long had made Jonah want to go even more. Exploring was something he'd always done, even before the Molting, was part of his personality, and like the times when he didn't exercise because he couldn't, like when he was injured, or decided to take a break, he missed it. Having Doreen and Heike in his life and living at the cabin had kept him content for years, but he'd sensed they were getting close to leaving for quite a while now, and although he wasn't crazy about leaving his people to defend themselves, he knew they could.

He was looking forward to the outing because of the way that other missions always seemed to satisfy his curiosities upon their completion. It harkened back to his days in the military when he had to do something he didn't want to do but made the most of it. Plus, Jonah liked to know things. It was who he was, and being on the move was exhilarating for him, like sprinting, and felt necessary every once in a while. Being uncomfortable, in pain even, was familiar for him, and after feeling that way for so long, it was almost desired.

Along the way, he would destroy them when he absolutely had to. Although that wasn't the integral part of his current mission, he would earn that M-K tattoo he'd eventually have inked on his trigger finger. The idea for a tattoo had been Salgado's after they'd killed the Behemoth together before Henrytown. Jonah hoped Salgado was still alive. But also Donnelly and Jacobs and everyone else he cared about. Who was elsewhere in places unknown or just plain old missing?

Still alive but safe too.

Well, safe was never truly possible, but at least alive. He often thought about how few people were even still breathing. Whenever someone died—it didn't matter how they passed away—or molted, it gave the creatures a stronger foothold in terms of dominance. Every human death made the enemy stronger. Jonah's knowledge of that motivated him.

The faster he accomplished the mission, the faster he could return, and then they could establish themselves at another home. Wherever that was, deemed safe or dangerous by him—he couldn't know that until it was discovered—exploring would also give him a better understanding of the area surrounding the cabin. That was the point. Another reason was to identify the safest path to go on to that next place. But there was also a very real possibility they might remain where they were. It all depended on the state of beyond.

Doreen had offered to go with him, which meant Heike would have to come along, of course, but that would have defeated the purpose because it would put all three of their lives in danger. It was much better to risk only one

life, the person whose life was the most expendable. Jonah had to go by himself and get it done quickly so they could eventually have a semi-normal life. He was tired of always looking over his shoulder. Over their shoulders. It would be nice to get a decent night's sleep knowing there were dependable armed guards surrounding their living quarters.

After the Infector bomb, Jonah had chopped up all the grotesquerie with the ax and moved the remains. Jonah and Doreen stood on the porch together while the dead burned in the distance, billowing smoke up into the sky, dangerously high enough to give their position away. It was a necessary task and a brief risk they were willing to take because flesh could only burn for so long, and Jonah had already dug the shallow holes to bury the remains. It wasn't as if they had a choice. They'd been attacked, and cleanup after a battle was mandatory. Never ideal and always messy. Especially in this case.

Both held pistols, watching for more Infectors. She'd convinced him another gun would help, but together they were going no farther than the porch until after the burning was over. He realized she just wanted to talk some more as Heike was inside napping. The Molters appearing had little effect on Heike. They were nothing new to her. Them being killed wasn't either. Similar to an enemy during any normal war, Heike had no choice but to live with it, and not even bloodthirsty creatures would deter a little girl from taking a nap when she was tired.

Doreen said, "With as much as you do, it doesn't seem possible that so many could just show up."

"I agree," Jonah replied, "but there's so much we don't know about them."

"You probably know more than most."

"Maybe, but every question answered leads to a different question mark. Lately endless. Not just about them but everything. I can't allow myself to believe I have this territory completely under control. That's the day one of us gets killed. I've always suspected that when they appear like this, it's because a nearby community was overrun."

"How far is nearby?"

"I don't know. Within ten miles, I'd guess. Twenty maybe. There's gotta be more people out there." Something occurred to him and he had to ask. It had been weighing on his mind. "Are you all right with what you had to do?" Jonah saw her remember shooting the man off the porch.

"I'm fine. Really. I'm a little surprised by it . . . how I feel, but I was in the right."

He just wanted to make sure she was OK. "Did Heike see?"

"No. She was in her room." Clearly not wanting to talk about it anymore, Doreen said, "I hate that you have to leave."

"I do, too, but with the roads clearing—"

"They're not completely clear, though. There's still snow on the ground."

"I have a feeling it might always be that way at this elevation, and there isn't much we can do about it. There isn't as much as usual, and it is melting, which means I can venture out the way I have to. The way I used to."

"And if it snows again? That could strand you somewhere. I lived in Henrytown for years before I met you. These days, another blizzard seems to be always around the corner. Even when it is supposed to be spring."

"I won't be gone long. Even if I was gone for three weeks, I can make it back in time to take care of any cocoons that have formed. And if I missed one or two and a Behemoth was born—"

"Don't say it like that."

"The likelihood of it heading directly for the cabin and not somewhere else is . . . a thousand to one. No . . . a hundred-thousand to one. *No* . . . a *million*—"

"OK, OK. I get it. If you're confident enough . . ."

"I'm confident in what I've done, what I'm about to do, and I'm confident in you. Long enough to be gone for just a little while. I know it's a risk with everything that's happened lately, but soon it could be even worse. Much worse. Now is the best time because we're relatively in control. I can feel it."

Although Doreen understood, she still looked like she wanted to talk him out of it.

"You'll be fine. You're trained and well armed. You and Heike have plenty of food and supplies. I'd rather be away from you for a short time than . . . stay and then all of us . . ." *Don't say die*. "Are in grave danger because of it. Because I didn't prepare enough. *The end* could be approaching. I need to know what's out there. If we get overrun at night, we're dead."

"What's your objective?"

"I told you that already."

"Your *main* objective."

"To get the lay of the land."

"What haven't you told me?"

Jonah hesitated, carefully revealing his plans. "To locate potential threats if they exist. And eliminate them."

"You believe you can accomplish all that in only a few days?"

"Maybe. This scouting mission might branch into others. It's what I don't know that's gnawing at me. I need to gather intel."

"You're going into mission mode right in front of me." She closed her eyes and exhaled slowly, then eyes that were doing their best to accept the situation found him again. "What kind of threats? Molters?"

"Or people. Those men got too close to us, Doreen. I have to make sure there aren't any more incoming. Even though we'd have no trouble handling ourselves."

"You mean the arsenal?"

Doreen was referencing all the weapons in the cellar. "Very funny," he

said. “Yes, but I also want to differentiate between friend and foe. We’ve been on our own for a long time. Isolated, really. We cannot get to the point where we see everyone as the enemy.”

“I don’t think that way.”

“I’m beginning to . . . and it isn’t right. And it scares me a little.”

“What are you prepared to do?”

Whatever it takes, Henry. “Whatever I have to.”

“When will you leave?”

“As soon as we make sure there aren’t any more of those little bastards running around, and I bury those smoking remains. Please stay vigilant, especially when you use the outhouse. Always go together.”

“We always do.”

“I know, I just . . . I’ll be worried, and . . . I trust you but even I need to be reminded of things on occasion.”

“We all do.”

“Don’t leave the immediate area around home until I return.”

Doreen almost teared up. “What if you don’t?”

“I will. I promise. Make sure to move the spare truck every day. Don’t let it run for too long either.”

“OK.”

He leaned over, still aiming the pistol, and kissed her on the cheek. She hugged him for a while. Held on, really. “I’ll return. You’ll see. And once I come back, that’ll be the last time. Before we all leave together.”

Doreen hadn’t completely believed him though. He’d seen it on her face. It was a familiar look and one she gave him sometimes when she never thought she’d see him again. He’d seen that look far too many times, and it was one of the only ways he ever hoped to prove her wrong. He’d also told her to be prepared to drive away in the spare truck parked and poised for her and Heike’s escape if it were absolutely necessary. He didn’t have to tell her when that would be. She would know.

If the shit hits the fan.

Although it had been a difficult decision, Jonah chose to leave his first truck buried in the snow where it had crashed all those years ago after he rammed it into a Behemoth. It was totaled anyway, and instead of spending precious time and resources fixing it, he decided to find another one, besides Henry’s. Even though he’d abandoned the truck, and then hurriedly went back to it later to grab weapons for the battle in Henrytown to save whoever they could, after they’d settled at the cabin, he returned to the crash site one last time to strip everything of use.

After that was completed, he’d been meticulous about finding the replacement truck and ensuring its dependability by basically finding an exact

replica. The large, powerful new truck—to them—was equipped with snow tires and also loaded with supplies and weapons. He started it up every day, even when it was close to being buried beneath a fresh snowfall. Before it could be immobile, he would move it. Now starting the truck up every day would be one of Doreen's tasks.

If the satellites above were still taking pictures, those who saw them would likely think him crazy, even paranoid, because of how often he had moved the trucks only a few feet. During the winter, it was especially easy for it to get stuck, and it was imperative that they were mobile in case they needed to flee. With the roads clearing, preventative maintenance checks were one of his main concerns, to ensure both trucks were FMC—fully mission capable—and he was thankful such diligence was drilled into him while in the military. That knowledge had saved his ass too many times to count.

Carefully steering down the dirt roads in Henry's truck, he did his best not to speed. He wanted to because he hadn't done so in a while, and he was full of testosterone. Still, he kept the part of him that wanted to accelerate for no reason in check. No needless risks, only necessary ones. That was the spine of this exploratory mission.

There were a few places he wanted to investigate, and one of them was Henrytown, or what was left of it. He remembered how long it took to drive to the cabin from there, but a reverse direction wouldn't take as long this time as the roads were nearly bare of snow, but it wouldn't be his first destination. It would be his last before returning to the cabin. He intended to explore east first.

Driving in the snow and mud was a skill he'd honed as a soldier and was confident of, but he would still steer with caution. He couldn't afford to crash and become stranded. He was a family man now. Getting used to driving through snow or on ice was required while living in Germany or during a field exercise while operating a utility vehicle (UV), but as he'd learned as he wore an American military uniform, traversing the elements took practice, and practiced skill required many attempts. The trick while driving in snow was not to panic when things got squirrelly. Tires slipping typically caused the driver's heart rate to speed up all of a sudden. Jonah had learned to resist the urge to oversteer when panic flashed throughout his insides.

It wasn't as if he had never been involved in an accident though. After all, Jonah had been the one driving the van with Eric, Sharon, Gil, Daisy, and Danielle as passengers when it crashed on the way to the military base he'd been stationed at in Oberstein. But he didn't count the accident when he'd lost his temper and crashed into the Behemoth before he made his way to Henrytown because he'd done that on purpose. What a stupid thing to have done. Worse than stupid: a reckless, foolish, and asinine thing to do because that truck had kept him alive. Plus, it had been a nice one. For a brief time after he'd done that, his chance of survival had lowered to near zero.

It pained him to have made such a mistake, but what was interesting was

how it had saved lives after he and Doreen returned to Henrytown to fight with the arsenal in the truck bed. Jonah's instincts were solid. Even when he made mistakes, he found a way to make things right. Although he didn't want to encounter dangers on this mission, he would accomplish it without exception.

With all his experience and knowledge, now Jonah was practically a professional at driving across snowy, icy, muddy, or even sandy terrain. Essential weapons were with him, all of which could be replaced with the backups stored under the cabin in its cellar or at the secret burial locations, but the ones he had on the seat next to him were the silenced 9mm pistol and semiautomatic shotgun. The bolt-action rifle with the quick-release scope attached and silenced automatic rifle were on the gun rack. There were canteens filled with water, food, TP, and extra clothing inside the storage crate in the truck bed.

It was the same configuration he'd had in the truck he'd abandoned after ramming the Behemoth, except this truck belonged to Henry. That was another reason to take care of things; the American truck didn't belong to him, he was only borrowing it, and hopefully Jonah would be able to hand the keys back over to Henry one day.

"What if that doesn't happen?" He asked himself aloud. "Then I'll keep the truck," he answered quickly.

Although his head argued that Henry was long dead, his gut told him he was out there somewhere. Henry had obviously encountered some trouble; otherwise, he would have arrived at the cabin already as he said he would. But that seemed like a long time ago. A lot longer than it had been. Whatever happened may have gotten him killed. It could have been by Molter or man. Or even Behemoth. Especially after learning what they were now capable of, or had always been capable of, how they could feed just like a Molter.

Just focus on the mission at hand.

The snow tires gripped the icy—but mostly slushy—road. The dirt road wasn't paved but driven on enough to feel stable, even dependable for a truck the size of Henry's. Years ago, the same road had likely been used for logging or some other necessary business. Military training? That made sense. The military—both American and German—had performed field exercises all over the country, and most of the time they took place in the most uncomfortable places. That wasn't an accident. Any terrain and weather close to duplicating a war environment was chosen.

Jonah had never been so far east, but there were plenty of other places he'd been to in Germany while training. Being deployed to a desert during a war was arduous, but training in a place during the winter with a foot of mud everywhere was challenging too. At least you got some downtime during a war. Training didn't end until you returned to garrison: the escape and comfort of the barracks or housing.

Snickering to himself, Jonah was already lost in thought, the trees on both

sides of the road a creamy, green blur, remembering *all that training*. He had only served for a few days short of two years, but it had felt like a lifetime. There was so much that a soldier experienced in such a short period of time. At the beginning, it was all very uncomfortable being of lower rank with every higher-up looking to make subordinates do pushups or just chew them out for no reason, any reason they could think of, for training purposes, but the benefit was that, during that time, a camaraderie was established. For some it lasted years, others a lot longer than that. Jonah hoped many of his battle buddies were still fighting.

Tightening his grip on the wheel, he focused on the road. Mud blanketed the openness to his right and left where clumpy remnants of melting snow and wet continuously dripped from drooping tree branches. The temperature outside felt as if it were getting warmer, so warm that Jonah turned off the heat and cracked the window. It was still cold out, he knew, but the sudden jump in temperature made him feel hot. It had to be the descending elevation. He was driving downhill, after all, and it felt warmer the lower he drove.

Fortunately, so far, there were no threats in sight, no Molters or people with sinister intentions, and he had already driven for miles. Henrytown would be his last destination; his plan hadn't changed yet; and after a look—probably just a quick once-over of its condition—he would determine who, if anyone, had decided to call it home. It seemed possible that others could have moved in after what had happened there, even with the degree of its destruction from the fires and when he'd manned the fully automatic grenade launcher.

Depending on their destruction, homes could be rebuilt, so there might be people living there, a group of them, and maybe even the community the dead trespassers belonged to. Or Henrytown could be filled with Molter nests or even be considered a home by a Behemoth. He would decide its danger level once he arrived, whether some clearing needed to be done, but then he would return to the cabin.

Henry had kept his truck running and in excellent condition considering he acted as his own mechanic. It wasn't as if there were auto shops just around the corner. Jonah kept it tip-top also, and he was comfortable driving in the conditions, but he was still being extra careful whenever a road ended, and he had to turn onto a different one, remembering when he did and marking it on a map so he could find his way back more easily. He had a great memory, but he still wanted to do everything right and safely and back up his backup plans whenever possible.

There would be no one to help him out if he slid off the road or was in an accident, and he'd be shit out of luck if his vehicle was inoperable. He hadn't seen an operable traffic signal in years, and there were no police to intercede if there was trouble, so if he encountered another driver, it would be the wild west. The wild east, actually, and especially if the driver of that other vehicle was looking to loot or worse.

Slowing at a cross street that looked to be a main road, he decided to stop and inspect the map, an actual map that he hadn't drawn by hand and had been manufactured. It was the same one he'd used to locate the military bases around Germany after Oberstein. He marked it based on which direction he would go.

Looking left and right, both ways practically looked identical: trees, gray-bright sky that couldn't decide which season it wanted to be, and snowy road with patches of mud. It was still very snowy everywhere.

Wouldn't there be more snow at the cabin and less snow down here because of the elevation?

Answering that question changed nothing, so he decided to think of other ones, like if he would have encountered any Molters already if he had decided to drive while it was dark because they mostly hunted at night. It occurred to him that he would have to drive at night at some point but was certain he could handle himself while in the truck. He would always keep the doors locked while inside the cab.

He noticed how loud the powerful engine was as it idled, so he turned the key toward him, and the world abruptly went silent.

Rolling down the window by cranking the handle as quickly as possible, he listened, and as he did, a chilly breeze hit his face that somehow felt warm and cold at the same time. His warmth, its cold. He wasn't sure what he was listening for. Anything really. A hint of life or a sign of danger that would cause him to act and turn the appropriate war gear inside him. His reaction would propel the truck wheels in an appropriate direction that was safer than there. Luckily for him, there were roads.

It was peaceful and the kind of quiet that only seemed possible at a high elevation. The silence was as if everything around him was asleep, including the land and trees. Nobody had probably been through in years. But then he saw something of interest and also concern, but in a way he'd expected.

Pulling the keys from the ignition, he grabbed the shotgun riding shotgun and opened the bulky door. It swung open with a *creak* that caused his brow to furrow with disgust. *That's new.* His boots landed on snow and ice, the frozen cold lingering even though it was melting, but it still crushed under foot and would remain slippery until it disappeared completely. He would be careful that he didn't accidentally lock the door behind him when he shut it in case he needed to get back inside quickly.

Fumbling for keys before he could get back inside the cab would be a stupid way to die. He made sure it was unlocked by looking inside at the passenger door, squeezed the keys in his hand before putting them in his front pants pocket, leaned in and grabbed his backpack, and carefully closed the door until it snapped.

Then he turned and froze as still as the ice beneath his feet, listening for a good five minutes until he was sure that whatever was responsible for what he was about to examine was long gone. Unfortunately, it was one of the rare

times he'd been wrong. People had passed through and likely recently.

Jonah walked slowly, ready to raise the shotgun and fire at any potential threat, be it man or monster. He saw his breath even though it seemed like it would be too warm for that. He still wore his army green cold-weather jacket and pants to keep warm because there was a wrestling match going on between winter and spring, but the bold and ever-present wind never took sides. The crunching under his booted feet created more noise than he wanted, no matter how trained he was.

Another downside of walking the remnants of winter was that it somehow created an echo. Difficult to pinpoint accurately, but noisier than walking on dirt or even pavement. Most soldiers could move across a landscape in utter silence under those conditions. Then Jonah actually slipped a little—there was still a lot of ice on the ground—and his feet almost kicked out from underneath him. He felt his heart flutter, which made him chuckle.

It reminded him of a field exercise while in the military where there was a foot of mud everywhere they went. Comedy ensued as so many trained killers ended up on their asses in the mud no matter how badass they believed themselves to be. After being out training for weeks without bathing, they were finally allowed to return to base. Everyone was filthy, and the tile floor of the shower had looked like a brown lake once they were all through. To go from that filthy to that clean, it had been the best shower of Jonah's life.

Same country, different world, he thought. And all those experiences had happened only within the last decade.

There was suddenly a hushed voice, and for a second he thought that maybe it was the echo of his chuckle from a few moments ago. He peered around, the end of the shotgun barrel pointing at his view as he searched for any sign of life, but saw nothing. Just his imagination, he supposed.

If Molters appeared—unless there were hundreds of them—he could kill them far more easily when unhidden than when in the depth of the forest. He could also make it back to the truck rather quickly unless he slipped. He'd seen around a hundred Molters at once before at the military base he'd been stationed at after he killed the Behemoth, and also in Henrytown, but that was a swarming behavior he rarely encountered. Especially lately and not around here.

Occasionally, an enemy exposed a weakness when they attacked because they lost control, similar to when a bee's nest was broken open by someone by accident, but instead of going after whoever was responsible, the bees went after the nearest person. That kind of chaos could be controlled if whoever was responsible knew what they were doing, as Jonah did. Foreseeing the inevitable—like the progress of enemy movements—could be used for benefit by setting a trap, something Jonah knew how to do.

Whatever—or whoever—he considered to be his enemy often didn't know what was happening until it was too late. He had defeated enemies that way during the war, and now he defeated Molters. It was how he had killed the

Behemoth at the base in Oberstein. It had followed him right where he wanted it to go, where he was leading it. Almost killed him, but he survived. Unfortunately, recently, he'd had to do the same thing to people. Again.

Unconcerned with the sound he'd heard—or thought he'd heard—for now, he crouched and saw impressions in the slush that only a vehicle could make. The tracks looked to be recent too; otherwise, they would have melted already or been obscured by fresh snowfall. The tires looked wide and similar to the ones on Henry's truck and the backup truck back at the cabin. The road seemed to have been traveled on recently and often.

There was something else that concerned him even more than the identifiable tracks. Not all the treads were the same, which meant multiple vehicles, and based on the size of the tires, they were all probably trucks. And if the truck beds were taken advantage of, it meant there could be dozens of people—maybe hundreds—possible enemies, to contend with.

His thighs realized he'd been in the same position for a few minutes too long, so it was when Jonah adjusted his stance that he saw the cocoon out of the corner of his eye. He stood up straight, arched his back and stretched, and stared at the developing monster hanging from a tree branch across the road. The growing Behemoth hadn't only formed recently. It had been there for a few weeks, at least.

The cocoon was dark and bulbous, heavy because of the weight of what grew inside it, and looked as if it were about to split open and birth the monstrosity within. Jonah turned, intent on going back to the truck to replace his shotgun with his bolt-action rifle and doing what he'd done many times before, but unfortunately even he could be taken by surprise, especially when his focus was on taking the time to kill a Behemoth before it began its reign of death.

So when two trucks appeared in the distance to his right at incredibly high speeds for these conditions and headed right for him, Jonah wasn't sure what to do. With all his mental preparation and readiness, he actually hesitated.

Fire at them as if they were his enemy? Or wait and see what they were going to do, or even had to say? They were the same species, after all. But so were the people he'd been forced to deal with near the cabin.

Jonah opened his backpack while squatting down, removing the map he'd drawn of actual stash locations and the map detailing his path—he hadn't made enough turns not to have memorized them already—and lit them both on fire with the handy lighter in his pocket.

There was a map inside a gap in the ragged carpet beneath the seat of Henry's truck, but it was a fake, and he didn't want to destroy that one. Its purpose had always been to mislead potential thieves or be used to bargain. He pretended to warm his hands over the small blaze as he thought about what to do next and watched the potential threats speed closer.

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CHAPTER 8

The trucks were similar in size to Henry's, the truck Jonah was driving, and also the backup truck at the cabin—extended cabs, long beds, powerful engines—and they were obviously equipped with snow tires too. That was when he noticed there were men in the beds. They wore scarves or stocking caps or both, and they all held weapons ready: bolt-action rifles, assault rifles, pistols, or shotguns.

Even if Jonah did start shooting, there were already too many of them for him to take on himself. And not with just a shotgun, not at this range, and he didn't have his pistol handy. It was in the truck. *Silenced* pistol, he remembered. He'd left the silencer attached, which he could remove easily, but once at the truck, the 9mm was practically useless against the weapons they were carrying—with there being so many of them—and would be more like only a show of force. No better than the shotgun. And it wasn't as if he could sneak up on them. They'd already spotted him.

Yes, he could send some buckshot their way, but then he would have to run for the truck and make a standoff using the silenced automatic rifle. The one that was still on the gun rack inside the cab. He should have laid it on the passenger seat. Kept it ready in case things went south like they had. He would do that from now on. Take the shotgun out with him, but leave the rifle handy, and not venture so far from the truck. He would park it closer to wherever he intended on walking. That plan of action wasn't going to help him today.

The trucks braked, going from high speeds to a halt within seconds, a loud, slushy slide that seemed to be intended to intimidate Jonah. The men who jumped out of the beds and the exiting drivers immediately aimed their weapons at him. There was another man in the passenger seat of the lead truck, but he remained inside.

With everyone who threatened him—there might even be more on the way—Jonah couldn't figure a way of escape without doing something stupid that might get him killed. He was so exposed it was as if he was trying to hide in the middle of an open field, so he slowly rose up and stamped out the blackened, burning paper.

Then he held the shotgun up in the air and his other hand too. He remembered the radio under the front seat. Why hadn't he put it in his backpack? He could warn Doreen about what was happening if she had hers in reach, which he was sure she did. Then again, and based on the behavior of the armed men approaching, maybe it was better that he didn't have the radio on him.

"Drop the gun!" one of them said. He had long blondish hair, and although he'd attempted to grow a beard, he was unsuccessful. It grew in straggly,

sparse patches. He aimed an assault rifle. “Now!”

Jonah was betting that neither he nor the rest of them, spoke German. The men he’d killed had likely been with them, and when Jonah had tried to greet the first man he encountered in German, he hadn’t understood what Jonah had said.

“Nein Englisch,” Jonah said. *“Deutsch.”*

“Oh, like hell. Fine. *Ich spreche Deutsch*. We all do. Which language do you prefer?” He waited. “Nice try, asshole. You look more American than any of us. Now do as I said!”

So, they were all American too. “I’ll lower it but I’m not going to put my . . .”—he almost said *weapon*—“gun on the ground.”

They obviously thought Jonah was dangerous, but they had no idea how dangerous he really was—no sense in hinting at his military background by calling his shotgun a weapon—and he was smart to think of them the same way, not to underestimate them either. Until proven otherwise. But their demeanor, for now, was clear; they were a threat, and he was ready to shoot if they did.

The blond shook his weapon, as if that might be as intimidating as firing it. “I said drop it!”

“I heard you. But I’m not going to do that. I’m not a threat. Watch.” Jonah slowly swung the shotgun away from them and lowered it, pointing the barrel at the ground. “See?”

“Put it on the ground!”

Jonah felt his temper flare, and that got his blood up. It wasn’t that he couldn’t take being yelled at—he could—he just didn’t like being disrespected. Tone of voice was a language all veterans understood, especially one that was condescending. The blond had no idea who he was dealing with. Good thing for them they were all armed.

If the circumstances were different and there weren’t any weapons involved, Jonah would have loved to go toe to toe with the one doing the yelling. Unfortunately, altercations couldn’t always be controlled, and he didn’t feel like hurting anyone if he didn’t have to. Or getting knifed. Didn’t feel like dying, either, so, very reluctantly, he bent over, keeping his head up so as not to take his eyes off them, and placed the shotgun gently on the slushy ground.

“You go the same way as the shotgun, on the ground!”

“Fuck you,” Jonah said. “If you’re going to kill me, I’m going to be standing.”

The blond was shaky. “Any more weapons?”

“In the truck.”

“No more on you?”

“Just a machete.”

“Drop that too!”

This guy. Amateur. Jonah might have been able to hit him with the

machete, accurately, from this distance. Maybe not. He was too pissed off. It would probably go over his head. Glancing around at the others, it looked as if they were ready to shoot him at any moment anyway. As if Jonah had done something wrong. Those he killed were almost definitely part of this lot, but they didn't know what Jonah had done. He yanked his machete out of the sheath and let it fall tip down. It sank into the ground handle up. Ready to grab.

"Put your hands up!"

Jonah exhaled, rethinking that he wanted to kill this guy, and slowly raised his hands, just to the height of his stocking-capped head. "What's this about?"

The blond turned his head but kept his eyes on Jonah and said, "Perry?"

The passenger door of the lead truck opened, and a boulder shaped like a man got out. The truck raised a few inches afterward. He was very muscular, obvious even from under a puffy yellow jacket, and he had a thick, black beard going gray that grew up his bulging cheekbones. He wore a brown stocking cap and slowly approached Jonah holding—but not aiming—what looked like a German revolver.

"You must be in charge?" Jonah said.

Perry didn't say anything at first. He just stared down at Jonah as if he were carefully choosing his words. "What are you doing?"

"You'll have to be more specific," Jonah said, and lowered his hands.

Blond took a step forward, shaking his assault rifle. "Keep those hands up!"

Jonah kept his arms at his sides. "I'm not armed anymore, asshole."

"Maybe more reason not to curse at my men," Perry said.

"So you are in charge."

"Of this bunch. For now. Right here. In this moment. What were you burning?"

Jonah stared right back at him, but he had to look up slightly because of Perry's height. "Just keeping my hands warm. Cold out here, so I'll be on my way," he said, turning to leave.

"Like hell you will," Perry said behind him in front of the group of armed men. "And I bet it was something you didn't want us to find."

Jonah spun. "Do I owe you money or something? We met before?" Before Perry could answer him, Jonah said, "I'm just minding my business. You should do the same."

"Or what?" Blond said.

Perry twisted his head and cleared his throat, then turned back to Jonah. "Where are you coming from?"

"None of your business."

Perry's eyebrows raised. "Where?"

Jonah shook his head and shrugged.

"Not gonna say?"

Jonah grinned. "What would you do if you were me? I'm sure you can

understand."

"No, I'm not sure that I do."

"Why would I tell armed men—?"

"No," Perry said, cutting him off. "Why wouldn't you tell armed men?"

The scruffiest of the bunch spoke up. "He has something to hide."

"No shit," Jonah said to him. "Just tell me what you want."

Better to get to the root of what was going on than dance around it. Learning the truth was an eventuality anyway. No matter what. Jonah already had his suspicions. It would be easier on everyone not to waste time, especially his own. Either there was going to be a fight, or he was going to drive away.

"You alone?" Perry said.

The last man who had used those exact words to him was Henry, but Jonah could already tell that Perry and the men behind him were not the same caliber of character. They couldn't be trusted. "You see anybody else?"

"No."

Jonah waited a few seconds. "We done?"

"We've been looking for our people. They're missing. For a few days now. You see anybody else besides us lately? In the last few days?"

Finally. Nice to know what this is all about. "Nope," Jonah lied.

"You sure?"

Jonah only stared back at him.

Perry smirked. "You got balls considering all the guns on you. I don't believe you, though. Nobody else but us and now you . . . I know you were involved."

"Why ask me then?"

"To give you a chance." The revolver stayed at Perry's side, but he made a circular motion with his empty left hand, and the other men began to slowly approach Jonah, stopping just short of surrounding him. "Just tell me where you came from. Make this easy."

Jonah didn't have much room to back away. "Easy for who?"

"How big is your group? No way you survived this long by yourself."

"Sorry. Just me."

"My logic says otherwise. Even if that was true, which I know it ain't, I know you got shit. Everybody does."

"You're looking at it. What's on me and what's in my truck."

"Tell me more."

Most people could be coerced or sidetracked with new information because they weren't used to dealing with the lowest form of humanity as Jonah was. No sense in giving up anything at all now that their intention was clear and knowing what kind of people he was dealing with. They had done this before. But intentionally messing with corrupt individuals could allow Jonah to gain intel.

Perry's eyebrows raised even higher. "Where?"

"Told you. The truck."

"Not the truck. Where your main stash is."

"Stash?"

"Stop messing around."

"Your questions don't make any sense."

Perry's big mouth opened in disbelief as if his words were blocked by something lodged in his throat. He almost turned around to get confirmation from his men that maybe Jonah was right, that what he was saying was confusing, when he realized he was being messed with. He smirked. "All right, all right."

"You'll have to be more specific."

"Where? Do? You? Sleep?"

"A . . . bed."

Perry's eyes hardened. "And where is this bed located?"

Turning, Jonah pointed to Henry's truck, and Perry huffed with impatience. Jonah was willing to keep this charade going as long as possible. If they'd intended to execute him, they would have done it already, and if they had tried to do that, he would have come up with another plan altogether. Mostly it was best to swim downstream no matter how dangerous the waters were until there was a place to grab on to some shore.

Jonah was going to mess with Perry and his men as much as possible until whatever happened next. He doubted Perry was the main person in charge back where they all came from. Subordinates were sent out for tasks like this one, and Jonah had already sized him up; big guys were rarely challenged for obvious reasons, so they often didn't know how to react, and Jonah enjoyed using mental warfare on a bully.

"Tell us where you're from," Perry said. "Where you live. Give us what you got, and we'll let you go."

"Which is it? Tell you where I live or give you what I got?"

"It's not a choice!"

"You made it sound like a choice."

Blond said, "Can't we just kill him?"

"Shut up!" Perry bellowed up at the sky but surely directed at the one who just spoke until he focused back on Jonah. "He's right you know. We could just put a bullet in you. Probably be easier to be honest, but that's a pain in my ass. You could be from anywhere in these hills, and we got hungry people. You're only delaying the inevitable. There's a lot of us."

"How many is a lot?"

"Don't tell him," Blond said.

Perry grinned. "Enough to scour these hills and find your house . . ."

Jonah felt a fluttery panic in his stomach but hid it well. "Actually, it's a resort. Two stories. Infinity pool." Jonah glanced around at the rest of them. "A bar, well stocked, of course. Extra rooms. There's so many I sleep in a different bed every night. You guys would love it."

"Shut the fuck up!"

Jonah nodded curtly. "You're the boss."

Perry angrily cocked the hammer of his revolver and stepped closer to him. "I'm going to find out where you live. Then *we're* going to take everything you have. If there's anybody you care about living there, we're going to kill them. Make no mistake about that. The only way to escape with your life is *if* you cooperate."

Escape being the choice term. Jonah glanced down and eyed Perry's revolver. His finger was on the trigger. "You won't find anything if you kill me."

"A man who gets shot in the kneecap will survive . . . and tell us what we want to know. Be more apt to, also."

Jonah might actually have to give up some information just to stay alive after all. Perry was a prick, but he also had an agenda. If it were up to those standing behind Perry, Jonah would likely already be shot. Because Jonah was in the predicament he was in meant that he'd made mistakes. What he didn't know was whether he was making more by judging the community Perry kept referring to as similar to Perry himself and the men behind him. Maybe that was another mistake. Maybe they weren't all dangerous too. They could be decent.

"You listening?" Perry said.

Jonah had never been in circumstances like this before and felt completely out of control. Except for his choice of words. He nodded over and over and shook his head as if he was actually about to reveal the truth. "I'm from a town."

"Where is this town?"

"A few miles from here. Twenty miles. Thirty, maybe."

"That's more than a few. The town have a name?"

"It wouldn't be on any map."

"How's that?"

"It's called Henrytown. Named by its citizens."

The men behind Perry laughed.

"I have no idea what it was called originally, so I wouldn't be able to point it out on a map. I just know how to get there." Jonah's brows knit together. "You all heard of it? What's so funny?"

Perry tilted his head to the side and *cracked* his neck. "Yeah. We heard of it. But how about you start telling the truth."

"Go check for yourself if you don't believe me. I can give you directions."

"We don't need directions. That place was abandoned."

"Amazing where you can live if you absolutely have to."

"We took everything. There's nothing left. And I certainly didn't see you. There was no one there."

"I don't believe you."

"Then we have something in common."

"The sign," Jonah said. "The one that read Henrytown. Was it still standing?"

Perry thought for a moment. "Yeah."

Not a surprise. Thing was sturdy, and apparently it was the second one they built after Henry tore down the first one. Jonah realized he should have run already. Made a move before they got near him. Should have booked it for the truck, shot at them, and then sped off. He was confident he would have lost them on the road somewhere, but he suspected they lived close by, which meant that, no matter what, he probably would have to eventually deal with them. But he preferred when he could have been ready.

The men seemed to have no idea of what was behind them. They were too focused on Jonah. They probably didn't understand their lifecycle as well as he did. For the first time in his life, he actually hoped a Behemoth would be born; he'd use it to distract them so he could get away. But it didn't look like that was going to happen while they were all just standing there. That would work out too perfectly for him.

"Did you know Henry?" Perry said.

Jonah did his best to act confused. "Huh?"

"Of Henrytown. You knew him?"

"Knew?"

"He knows him," Blond said. "Too bad Archard killed him."

"No, he didn't," another said.

"Shut your mouths!" Perry shouted.

Holy shit. They know Henry?

Jonah wanted to ask about Henry, exactly how they knew him, where he was, what happened to him . . . but that might mean exchanging information. If they knew Henry, then they might know everything about him, or just enough, and any hint of familiarity might mean giving up Doreen and Heike and also everything that was at the cabin. Henry would agree with Jonah's ruse most of all, pretending not to know who he was.

Time to do something stupid.

Jonah could leave the shotgun behind. He had more. He only had one machete, though, and would hate to lose it. But he had plenty of knives. He thought about grabbing the handle of the machete but if he started slashing at those who would definitely give chase, then bullets were sure to follow. Jonah changed his mind about grabbing it and started taking slow steps backward toward the truck, watching how they would react. "You know what? Fuck you! Fuck all of you!"

Perry aimed his revolver at him and raised his other hand. "Whoa, whoa, whoa."

Jonah turned, calling their bluff. "I'm leaving."

"No man, you're not." Perry whistled.

Turning just in time, Jonah crouched as the guy nearest to him, Blond, slid his rifle around his back and tried to grab him. Jonah was ready for it and

thrust skyward with his palm as hard as he could, right up into the guy's nose, driving it into his brain.

Blond froze in place momentarily and then fell backward, landing hard on part of the road that was absent any slush. He was probably dead before he hit the ground, but Jonah didn't even wait to see what the aftermath of his strike would be. It was meant as a distraction, and he sprinted for Henry's truck.

On his way, he heard what sounded like the sudden rush of a very powerful wind. He quickly deduced there was probably something being swung at his head, likely the butt of one of the many weapons that the men had been ready to shoot at him ever since they all drove up. Knowing what he knew, he had a plan for something like that also, so he ducked the intended blow, watching one of them follow through with the swing as he'd thought, but Jonah slipped and went sprawling across the ground. He jumped up, ready to throw his fists at the one who'd attempted to knock him unconscious, when Perry crashed into him with a plan of his own.

When the large man grabbed Jonah in a bear hug and turned his back toward the armed men, Perry said, "Shoot him."

Jonah felt the cold bite of failure, picturing Doreen's worried face and how all along she'd been right, how he would never return to her, and braced himself for a bullet. Instead, he felt a painful pinch in the middle of his back, and as he doubted he'd actually been shot with a bullet—it almost felt like he'd been stabbed instead—his world vanished.

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CHAPTER 9

It was snowing and had been throughout the night, but it didn't look as if it were accumulating. Just puffy flakes falling steadily beyond the tent flap, from what he could see in his view, and the sound of outside was somewhat absorbed by what was burning inside the portable stove nearby. The final sputtering of a determined winter? He was also curious if the same thing was going on at the cabin. Higher elevation there so the snow might even be sticking. If the world ever got back to normal, somebody would need to rename the seasons. Or at least extend them, especially in Germany.

At least the tent was warm, but Jonah was still shaken by what had happened. Although he had been in the military, a close cousin to prison, he'd never been locked up, and that's what his present circumstances felt like. He definitely should have been put in jail on a few occasions, for fighting or driving while drunk, but he'd been fortunate enough to escape those risky circumstances relatively unscathed.

That certainly wasn't the case for him now. Jonah had deduced that he was either a prisoner or only being kept alive to serve a purpose he didn't understand yet. He'd heard the rumblings of the men as he woke up from whatever had put him out. Thankfully it wasn't a bullet that had been shot in his back after Perry had grabbed him. It was a tranquilizer of some sort. Although he was looking for any opportunity to lash out, fight, or just plain old escape, to get back to his loved ones, Jonah tried to act as calm as possible.

Jonah was often confused by his occasional depression. Whenever it happened, it came on suddenly, similar to catching a cold. Some might call a depressed mind a weakness. Jonah knew better, of course; it was something he'd dealt with most of his adult life, but regular healthy people had no idea how hobbling it could be. And if there were ever a time for Jonah to be depressed and feeling low, it was definitely now: trapped, far from his people, but worst of all, his vulnerability was putting them in danger.

Except Jonah was on a mission, and when in the midst of one, he was in mission mode, which meant he was stronger than Perry looked. The military had made a huge mistake by kicking him out all those years ago for selling drugs. They should have changed the rules. Punished him, of course, but military punishment, and not given up on him altogether. He would have taken it, whatever the reprimand had been. He would have learned from his mistakes and could have attained a very high rank. He was sure of it. But would he be alive now if he'd been able to remain in the military?

Before he was brought inside the tent, sat in a chair, and his hands zip tied behind his back, he'd peered around the fort as inconspicuously as he could. The fort had been built recently, obviously since the Molting began, so within

the last few years, but its architecture was reminiscent of structures from hundreds of years ago during times of war. It was made from full-length trees that were sharpened at the ends and tied together, their bases buried deep underground, to form a protective wall. Jonah couldn't be sure who was directly responsible for its planning, but it was an impressive structure.

Some of the people he'd glimpsed milling about had certainly helped build the fort. It would be impossible for a project of that scale to be erected by one person. There weren't very many of them, though. Less than a hundred? He'd seen other large tents, similar to the one he was in.

Tents typically meant short-term living quarters. In all likelihood, the fort was for defensive purposes, a place envisioned for a possible battle or it had become one—the tips of the trees that made up the fort were sharpened for a reason—and one of those battles likely involved a Behemoth impaling itself in an attempt to breach its walls.

From Jonah's brief perspective, having peered almost straight up the walls of trees before being hauled inside the tent, the fort looked to be nearly fifty feet tall or higher. He'd glimpsed guards carrying weapons on a lengthy platform that circled along the top, keeping an eye on things from above. Ladders on both sides reached upward. Jonah hadn't glimpsed any trees growing past the fort. They must have been cut down. Smart.

Jonah had considered doing the same thing around the cabin, but if he was busy cutting down trees, then he couldn't be clearing, which was the foundation for their safety there, and that was always his most important mission. And Jonah was only one man, but most importantly, he didn't want to provide a clear view of where they lived. Considering the trouble with people already and his current predicament, it was smarter of him not to have gone that route.

He'd also thought about throwing a camo net over the entire cabin, but he remembered his days in the military, and once covered in snow, caked with mud, or frozen stiff, those things weighed a ton. It would only be partial camouflage anyway, and only to other humans—assuming they were hostile—but the creatures probably wouldn't even notice it. A net would have been ineffective unless there were multiple attacks by dangerous people, and if that were the case then he would have left it over the roof for the duration. But if there were that degree of trouble, Jonah and his people would have left the cabin already. Going through the process of locating a net, hauling it back, and covering their home would have been a waste of his time. His focus had been best directed elsewhere.

On the ground of the fort, there had been mostly men in view, who were also armed, but there were also some women and even children. Jonah hadn't expected that. For some reason, when he decided the people he'd encountered were his enemy, he imagined that all of them would be male and look like Perry: big, strong, and intimidating. None of them had looked in his direction when he was brought in, and that made him suspect there had been others

brought in the same way and used for a purpose that made him think his future was bleak.

Jonah wondered if any of them had been from Henrytown, but he didn't recognize any of them, and it was difficult to get a clear view of anyone from where he was currently. Also, no one was in a hurry to go near him. Since his arrival he'd been treated as an enemy, which he understood. He would, and did, view a stranger the same way until proven otherwise.

It occurred to him that the fort and places like it existed thousands of years ago in their many barbaric iterations. Things did not look good for him at all. At least he hadn't been put in the cell he'd glimpsed beyond the fort. Dressed warmly or not, exposure would kill even him.

Like most, the ones outside the tent had looked like decent folks, but they were obviously under someone's control. They moved about like drones, not unlike the first strain of Molters that obeyed their Behemoth masters. A pecking order—or rank—could be a difficult lesson for many. The luckiest lived through a time without going to war, but being human, and by that being unable to avoid human nature, those blips throughout history were few and far between.

It was difficult for people to be decent or rational when fearful of who was in charge, which they obviously were because everyone seemed to be on edge but in a very busy way, as if they all had a job to do, and if they didn't do it correctly, there might be repercussions. It was probably far worse than that. Because of their behavior, he suspected whoever led them was dictatorial, so they were all likely brainwashed, something Jonah understood very well, being a former soldier. He quickly decided he would not trust anyone in the fort. However he escaped, which he would, it would be by his own doing.

That was when the tent flap opened all the way, and Jonah glimpsed a man talking to Perry. The one in charge? Maybe, maybe not. Perry was obviously briefing him about something of importance, which meant he was someone with authority, likely answered to the man or woman in control of the fort and whatever was going on here. The new guy was shorter than Perry, just as most human beings were—most weren't half man, half bear—but he had a strength Perry obviously respected. That meant something.

Upon a casual, inconspicuous inspection, Jonah saw he wore a bright orange jacket, and he had a mustache that had grown past his mouth. That wasn't the only reason Jonah couldn't hear what they were saying to each other; it was also their distance from him, and that wasn't a coincidence.

When Mustache Man turned to look directly at him, Jonah looked away. Jonah guessed they were talking about him, but when he glanced back at them—the flap was still being held open by someone Jonah couldn't see, some subordinate—their attention was elsewhere.

The fort was another community similar to Henrytown, only Jonah had no idea where the fort was located on a map. He had been unconscious during most of his transportation. The only thing he could tell was the place was at a

lower elevation than the cabin because he could breathe a little easier.

How far had they taken him from home? Doreen and Heike weren't in the tent with him, so he guessed far enough to alleviate his worry for a little while, but being away from them—especially imprisoned in a fort that belonged in another century—was daunting. Mostly because of Perry's threat to find where Jonah lay his head most nights and kill whoever lived there with him. That was something Jonah would never forget and might mean the difference between saving Perry or allowing him to die.

Jonah wondered about Henry's truck and its whereabouts. They'd obviously found the keys because they weren't in his pocket. When he'd woken up, he'd searched for his machete—amazing things could be done with a sharp blade with a handle—but he remembered where he'd left it before the fight, and they had probably taken it with them.

Then he spotted it. The machete wasn't that far from him and on a table nearby. Out of reach, though, especially with hands that were bound.

Out of the corner of his eye, Jonah saw Mustache Man say something to Perry that gave Jonah the impression it was a command because Perry hurried out of Jonah's view as if the speed with which he accomplished that command would impress. Then the tent flap fell closed, and Mustache Man was inside with Jonah. He walked in farther but remained at a distance as if he was prepared for Jonah to escape his binds and grab him. He stared at Jonah and waited expectantly.

Jonah didn't have the patience for any of it. He had to get back home. The sooner he could figure a way out of there the better. "You in charge?"

"I don't think anyone is these days."

"Then let me go."

"Can't do that. You're a threat."

"Because you don't know me."

"No. Because you killed one of us. The man you struck is dead."

Good. He was an asshole, and I told him as much before I killed him. "I was only protecting myself."

"But you're also staying put because of what you said to Perry and the others. More accurately, what you didn't say."

Jonah was about to ask what exactly the fuck his cryptic question meant, but he quickly decided he didn't give a shit. At least now Jonah knew the only way out of this mess was to escape. But he didn't allow his frustration to show. "I got shot."

"With a tranquilizer. My men felt threatened."

So, he is in charge. Funny how quickly people gave themselves away. But that was probably on purpose, just so Jonah knew who he was dealing with. "I was just minding my own business, man."

"What business would that be?"

"The one we're all in. Survival. Then I was surrounded and taken prisoner. Give me a damn break. I was the one who was being threatened. What would

you have done?"

"Probably something similar. Except I wouldn't have made the mistakes you did to get myself into your situation in the first place. I wouldn't have been that far from my vehicle. I would have driven off."

"You weren't there. So what the fuck do you know?"

He didn't take the bait. "Forgive their overreaction. They were only following my orders."

"What were those orders exactly? Had I made it to my truck and they went after me, what would they have done?"

He ignored both Jonah's questions. "We don't bump into many new people out there. A few of our own went missing recently, and because of how well we handle things around here we suspected regular interference. Not the kind that involves Molters."

The man stared at him as if he were waiting for Jonah to confess, tell him all the secrets Perry had tried to get out of him, to admit right there and then that he'd killed some of their people—the missing were likely the ones he was talking about—and that being in the tent would make that happen. As if that would have been enough. It wasn't. Since his time in the military, Jonah had learned to be mentally prepared for something unexpected such as a circumstance like this, and if he had to rot to death before spilling his guts, he would. But there were ways to avoid that.

"I'm Jonah."

He chuckled, studying him. "Frox."

"That sounds like a last name, Frox. What's your first name?"

Any way to show his dignity was a way to maintain control and could help Jonah in the immediate future with this kind of people: the desperate, bullying kind who believed themselves to be in control of something uncontrollable. But Jonah could tell Frox was tough no matter how calmly he was behaving.

Being civilized with the leader or someone with power was always wise, but establishing defiance to his underlings was wise, too, and would be expected because Jonah had made sure it had already happened. Especially by killing one of them. Both tactics could be ways for Jonah to manipulate all of them and then somehow free himself.

"Dietrich," Frox said.

"Dietrich, what do you want from me?"

"I want to know where you came from but also what you were doing out there."

"Out where?"

"Where you were found."

"You mean abducted. Let's be clear." When he didn't react, Jonah said, "Same as your guys. Searching."

"What were you searching for?"

"Supplies."

"I bet I can guess just what kind of supplies interest a man like you the

most. Weapons. Am I right?"

Jonah said nothing.

"Since the Molting, some things most would consider junk are practically priceless. Like your machete on the table." Frox waited for a reaction. "Think we could trust a killer such as yourself?"

Frox was baiting him. He was trying to get Jonah to admit to what he had done, but he wasn't about to do that. "It was self-defense. That's what happens when somebody tangles with me. Tell the others."

"I wasn't talking about what you did to . . . You clean your guns well, but they've been fired many times."

"A dirty . . . gun that misfires or won't fire is useless against *them*. How many of 'em have *you* killed?"

Frox's eyes sparkled with defeat. "I have no idea."

"Neither do I. What about money?"

"What about it?"

"Do you consider that priceless?"

"Why?"

"Because I have a lot of it."

Frox was doing his best to seem unfazed, but Jonah knew that wasn't the case. No one was uninterested in money. Most people fantasized about piles of bills, rooms full of them, and Frox was surely busy wondering just how much wealth Jonah actually had. Jonah was surprised that even now, even under the weight of the Molter threat, men could be manipulated if they believed something had value. Especially cash. It probably would always be that way.

Jonah had plenty of money: coins and paper. He snatched it up whenever he came across it. American dollars, Euros, or any other currency he discovered. Some of it he didn't even recognize. No matter what happened, there would always be someone who believed in the value of money. Even if it was just a collectible. Collectibles were worth something to somebody. How much worth could be bargained for. Unfortunately, Frox didn't seem to be interested in making a deal with any prisoners.

"If you don't tell me what I want to know this conversation will end, and any chance of you getting out of this tent alive will be over," Frox said.

That's probably true no matter what I do. But Jonah sensed a bluff. Maybe not entirely but enough for him to maintain being stubborn. "Told you. Looking for supplies."

"You must be horrible at it because you didn't have much in your truck."

They had definitely searched Henry's truck. "I'm picky."

"With the limits of findable resources? I doubt it. It means you live nearby where they grabbed you. You were coming from somewhere else because there were only enough supplies to survive for a short period of time."

"Is that a question?"

"Everything I've said to you needs to be answered for."

Frox alluding to the proximity of where Jonah was when they took him prisoner was both good and bad. They definitely didn't know where he lived, none of their people had informed those in charge about discovering the cabin, but considering how close every interaction with Frox's community had been, it was possible for them to eventually locate the cabin. They couldn't realize what a mistake that would be. Jonah wasn't the only former soldier living there, and that particular former soldier was not only a protective mother, but also someone armed with enough destructive weapon systems to make a battalion of soldiers confident to head into battle, whether it be against creatures or determined men.

"Where do you call home, Jonah?"

"Wherever I decide to lay my head at night."

"We both know that isn't true," Frox said, and waited with feigned patience that only showed how impatient he truly was.

Jonah only shrugged. He wasn't going to tell him anything if he could help it, and only some misleading information if he absolutely needed to, but Frox seemed to be able to see through it. So when Jonah saw Frox's intensity diminish and a calm, friendly demeanor appear, it was unnerving.

"You're American," Frox said. "How did you come to be here in Germany?"

Jonah thought for a moment. *Perfect. More mental warfare. Two could play at this game.* "By airplane. What about you?"

"I'm more interested in your answers for now. Why leave the States?"

"I was on vacation. I was traveling when all this went down. Now I'm like everybody else. Alone."

"You were traveling by yourself?"

"Who travels by themself?"

Frox nodded. "Family?"

They're probably all dead. It doesn't matter. "No, friends."

"Good. Even better. Spending time with family in such close proximity can be so stressful. Don't you think? They still with us?"

"You see anyone else?"

"I mean back where you're from."

Frox was much better at this than Perry. He was doing his best to coax info out of Jonah slowly, and Jonah had to admit he was quite good at the whole mental warfare thing too. But Frox had made the mistake of bringing up America. Now Jonah had a shield between answering his questions—all that Frox really wanted to uncover—and revealing anything about the cabin.

"Where are you from in the States?" Frox said.

Name. Rank. Serial number. It was the only information soldiers were supposed to give up when taken prisoner. This was a different kind of war, though, so Jonah was comfortable revealing other useless facts about himself. The more of them he divulged, the more he could implement them as a distraction. "California."

Frox nodded. “Been there. Wasn’t impressed.”

As if that was supposed to get a rise out of him. Frox had threatened to end the conversation earlier, but he hadn’t. In fact, he seemed to be enjoying it. For what reason? Jonah didn’t know. Some men had a darkness in them that enjoyed toying with people before they harmed them, or even killed them. Those kinds of monsters were rare, but Frox could be one of them.

“Where do you sleep most nights?” Frox said.

In a bed when everything is going well. On the couch when I’m in trouble. “Here and there.”

“Anybody with you when you’re *here* or *there*?”

“I’m all by myself now.” That wasn’t a lie. “Just an old coot in the mountains of a foreign country.”

Frox scoffed. “You’re hardly old.”

“Been feeling that way lately.” That wasn’t a lie either.

“Shit, kid, I’m older than you. What are you, twenty-five?”

“Twenty-eight. You must be about fifty-five, Frox?”

That got a grin out of him. “Fuck off.”

Jonah grinned back at him. “Where are you from, Frox? Here probably. Dietrich. That’s the most German-sounding name ever.”

“Originally, but I’ve lived all over.”

“But Deutschland calls?”

“It does.”

“What about the rest of these people?”

“From all over, really. You’ll probably find this funny, but some of them were on a cruise, of all things. They were just getting to port when all of this . . . happened.”

As Jonah listened, he was an observant statue, and what Frox was saying made him realize there was at least one positive result of the Molting: how people viewed one another. It didn’t matter where they were from or what they believed in or how they looked; when someone saw another person these days, they simply saw a fellow human being. Unfortunately, people were people, which meant someone knew that someone else might have something they needed, desired, or wanted.

Still, Jonah could tell that Frox was the type he couldn’t trust, for obvious reasons, but Jonah also found him perplexing at the same time. All Frox had done so far was attempt to pry information out of Jonah, and then all of a sudden, he just started opening up and talking. It was like some kind of game.

Or maybe Jonah was simply reading too much into it. Giving Frox too much credit. Maybe he was just a guy between a rock and a hard place with a difficult job to do. Regardless of Frox’s character, whether he was good or bad or somewhere in between—a common wondering about people for Jonah lately—he had to remember it was best not to trust anybody unless they were family.

“The cruise ship crashed?” Jonah said.

"No. It docked. They needed help, so we helped them, banded together and just kept moving, and finally . . . settled here."

There was definitely more to that story. Frox had lingered on his thought about where they currently resided. "In tents in a fort?" Jonah said. "Seems like you're all still on the move."

Frox evaded the question. "Europe is a common destination. Some of us have a common sort of job; some of us are ex-military. Like you seem to be."

So that's what he's getting at.

"So, are you?"

"Am I what?"

"Ex-military? Were you a soldier?"

"We all have a past. What did you do before all this?"

Frox's friendliness vanished, and the man Jonah first saw talking to Perry returned. "Answer *my* question, or this conversation will be over, and you know what that means."

Jonah thought quickly. He was starting to believe Frox's threats. Jonah shook his head. "I wanted to be a soldier but . . . it's embarrassing. The military didn't want me."

That part was true, and after about thirty seconds of intense scrutiny, as if Frox thought himself to be a human lie detector, he seemed to be satisfied with Jonah's answer. All the conversation before seemed to have led up to Frox wanting to know whether Jonah was prior service. It was like the first hard punch that wasn't a jab in a boxing match, and it had just been thrown.

Before Frox could dig any further and force Jonah to reveal any more information about anything he wanted to remain secret, Jonah said, "Why here? Why would you build your settlement here?"

Frox's charm returned. "To get away from them and then stay away from their masses. This far inland and in the mountains? Not their favorite hunting grounds. From what I hear about cities . . . not the place you want to be."

Which was what Jonah had always suspected. Mostly because it was common sense. There were far more people there to feed on. More to molt too. "Is the cruise ship still intact?" he said. "Is it still functional?"

Frox laughed. "Don't know, don't care. I hope I never see it again. It was infested as we fled, or . . . escaped, really. Probably sank from all the blood."

His tone was another sign of the kind of man Frox was. When referencing blood, it meant that people had died, but he talked about it as casually as if he were talking about the weather. Steady winter and the Molting didn't just chill the climate, seemed it chilled people's emotions too.

"How were there Molters at sea?"

"I have no idea. Someone was probably bitten by an Infector somehow, or there was a Behemoth stowed away. They live to spread."

If what Frox said was true, then that cruise ship could still be seaworthy. If others hadn't taken advantage already. If it were still in port, Molters might have to be dealt with. When in packs, many stragglers stayed behind dormant

—there always seemed to be at least one or two somewhere you didn't want them to be, like they'd been in the cave near the cabin—and it was probably filled with flesh piles from those who'd molted and been left to rot, but the ship wouldn't have been destroyed. Unless somebody did something stupid like sank it to kill any Molters onboard. Hopefully that hadn't happened, by action or by the sea itself.

"Where is that ship?"

Frox grinned. "I'm sorry to say that's the least of your worries."

No shit. "What is this place really? What is it used for?"

It was Frox's turn to mess with Jonah. "For most of us, it's a place to live."

"What do you call it?"

"Fort Perry."

"Named after your Perry?"

"He isn't . . . Yeah."

"Why not you?"

Frox shrugged and rolled his eyes, showing his disinterest in Jonah's questions. "Look, I can tell you have leadership qualities and experience. You can obviously fight. You killed one of my men. Maybe more than that."

Jonah said nothing.

"Anybody with your skills will have stockpiled more of what we need. Not only that, but if my suspicions about you are correct, you could be of great use."

Probably a trick. Jonah wasn't about to fall for it. "I'm a survivor."

"We all are. But who are you as a man?"

A trained killer who went to war, and since then, I've put down more Molters than I can count. I even killed some of your people, and soon I'll kill you and Perry and whoever else or whatever else gets in my way.

"How much pride are you willing to set aside to survive a little longer is what I'm asking?"

Jonah shook his head. "You're going to kill me no matter what."

"No, we aren't," Frox said defensively. "*We* aren't."

Whatever that meant. Jonah didn't want to be too defiant and deviate from learning more that might help him escape. He thought back to Doug, the man he had wrestled with before the Behemoth fed on him. All of them had pretended to want to know personal details about Jonah but that was only to get to what they were truly after, which was supplies, food, and weapons. Frox didn't care about what kind of man Jonah was or what skills he could offer. He was only trying to flatter him enough so Jonah would tell him what he wanted to know.

All Frox cared about, what any of them cared about, was what Jonah might own that could help them with whatever they deemed important. Intel was a weapon unto itself, and how it was used was up to the wielder. Jonah understood that very well, and his many fake maps crossed his mind.

"If I tell you where my stashes are located, may I leave?"

"It isn't that simple."

I'll fucking kill you. "Then why would I . . .? Of course, it is. The most important aspect of a negotiation is that both sides benefit."

"Negotiating. Is that what you believe is going on here?"

You're not the only one who can blow smoke up someone's ass to get what they want, Jonah thought. "I'm not sure why I have to remind a man of your intelligence about that," he said.

"It's complicated."

"Why?"

"Because . . . I'm not the man in charge."

So it's a man and not a woman. "Then who is?"

"His name is Archard. He's ex-military."

"Which branch?"

"He never said."

"Which country?"

"He won't say that either."

"Why? What's he hiding?"

"You of all people should understand. I think we both do. It doesn't matter."

"Then how do you know he's telling the truth?"

"He's a natural leader. If you ever meet him, you'll see."

Jonah had no doubt Frox believed that. "You speak for him?"

"Yes. I carry out what he—what we all need to make happen in order to stay alive."

Frox seemed like he was on the verge of explaining more, but for some reason, he held back. Something made Jonah think that if Frox threw back a few shots of whiskey with him, he would be an open book. Maybe Jonah could be the whiskey.

"How long will I be a prisoner?"

Frox only stared at him.

"Man to man," Jonah said. "I can take it."

"Not much longer, I'm afraid."

"Meaning?" When Frox struggled to explain, Jonah said, "Look, my outcome is gloomy, I get it, so what's in it for me to tell you *anything*?"

"Doing the right thing for your fellow man."

"Would you? Maybe it's where I am right now, but what the hell does that mean? What the fuck do I get out of cooperating? A quicker death?"

Frox inhaled and exhaled slowly. "You're a pain in the ass. Most people just go along."

"Go along with what?"

"This . . . but I can tell you aren't like the rest. So I'm going to be honest with you. We've survived this long by following a . . . system."

"What kind of system?"

"Invented by Archard. Reminiscent of ancient times. We call it the Draw.

Basically, a deterrent. Either they go for one of us . . . or all. We choose one, so when *they* go for him, *we* end them."

Frox left it at that as if Jonah was supposed to understand. Deep down, he probably did, but even for Jonah it was difficult to imagine that other people like himself, his own species, could revert to such barbarism. Sacrifice? *Really?* He felt his blood go colder than the ground beneath his booted feet. He wanted more intel.

"I'm afraid I don't know what you're getting at," Jonah said.

Frox turned slightly paler. "You really need me to say it?"

So, you have some reservations. That's a relief. That made it possible for Frox to slip up and present certain opportunities for Jonah. It didn't matter how determined people became; because they were human; there were always momentary possibilities in their behavior for an uptick from barbarism toward being civilized. As long as they weren't evil, it meant they could screw up their own plans.

"No," Jonah said. "Sacrifice."

Frox stretched his arms out, doing a poor job at masking his sore muscles as he'd gotten so involved in the conversation. "You aren't the first, and you won't be the last."

"Is that supposed to be reassuring? It doesn't matter how much you try to justify your actions." Word jabs. It was the only weapon Jonah had on him to use that might spill more intel. "If you kill people here or allow them to die, by your hand or by teeth or claws or however, Fort Perry will always be known as a place of slaughter. That's how history will remember it."

"If we don't do it, there might not be anybody to remember history. We need to spread our strength. It doesn't matter what the name of a place is. I don't care, and nobody else does either."

"Why name it then?"

"So we know where we're talking about."

"There are more of these forts? For the Draw? Is there a Fort Frox?"

"I'll let you wonder about that."

"Perry named this place, obviously."

"No, actually, he didn't. Archard did."

It was natural for people to name things, often nicknames—each other, pets—but also to endear places and things with names too. Similar to Henrytown, except Henrytown wasn't a place intended for sacrifice. Many people had died there, but that was an accident. They were attacked by Molters. This Archard had more power than Frox was letting on, and Jonah's word jabs had served their purpose. Now he knew more.

"You probably think Perry's just a brute," Frox said.

"No," Jonah said. "I think he's an asshole."

Frox laughed quietly. "He's an architect, or was." He raised his hands up as if outside the tent could be seen from within. "Look at this place."

"You think I care about the quality of the architecture of the place I'm

going to die in?"

Frox's raised hands lowered and clenched into fists at his sides, and then he looked like the man Jonah suspected him to be. "I know you killed our people. They never made it back, and you're one of the only strangers we've encountered in years."

That was disappointing to hear. Jonah had hoped everyone left alive from the battle in Henrytown would still be breathing, but he couldn't know.

"It had to be you," Frox went on. "Even if it wasn't by your hand, you were definitely involved."

"Are you kidding?" Jonah said. "What about Molters?"

Frox laughed. This time, he didn't try to quiet himself. "You've been living in the mountains for some time now. That's obvious. I'm sure you've noticed there haven't been many of them around lately. Why do you think that is?"

Because of my clearing. "Because of winter."

"That helps. The cold has always kept them sluggish, but it's what we do that keeps them scarce in this territory. Ever wonder how that was possible? How that was happening? With the way it is now?"

Frox waited, but when Jonah didn't reply, he went on, and as Frox spoke, Jonah thought it sounded like a confession to someone who didn't matter because he would soon be dead. The end of Jonah's life seemed like it was fast approaching.

"Every battle someone has faced has been possible to win," Frox said. "Every war, every fight, every threat. But not this. Never has the planet turned against us like it has on this one."

"Don't forget mosquitos."

Frox almost laughed but grew serious again. "This war is unwinnable. Personally, I think the Molting is a response to overpopulation. But what I think doesn't matter because it doesn't change the fact that our race is doomed."

"If that's the case, then why the Draw?"

"Because I'm just hoping to live a lifetime before that happens. So, to make that happen, and under Archard's leadership, we do whatever we have to. To ensure our survival until the end."

"Just your people, though."

"Not necessarily, but what we do works."

"If you say so." Jonah wasn't about to give up no matter what. He wouldn't just lie down and die no matter what his gut was telling him, that any fight left in him might be pointless. That his fate was already sealed. *Up yours, gut!* "How does the Draw actually work?"

Frox whipped his hand around from his back and slowly revealed a two-way radio. *Jonah's* two-way radio. As Jonah focused on it and all it meant, Frox reached under his shirt and grabbed an automatic pistol with his other hand. He then aimed it at Jonah's forehead, still at a distance that expressed he

believed Jonah could break out of his bonds and go after him.

"I gave you a chance to do the right thing. Unless you contact whoever is on the other end of *this*," Frox said, holding up the radio with menace. "I'm going to pull *this* trigger."

Jonah laughed at Frox as something else occurred to him. They hadn't found the fake map in Henry's truck.

Frox's bushy eyebrows knit together. "What could possibly be funny?"

Thinking quickly, Jonah said, "It's just a radio."

"A two-way radio."

"With multiple channels. Whenever I go out, I'm hoping to find others. Well, usually. At least that's what I was thinking before you folks."

"You're lying."

Jonah said nothing, just stared up at him, trying to ignore the bullet that might or might not enter his brain in the next few seconds.

"I figure whoever you talk to is on the selected frequency," Frox said. "Say something or you're dead."

"Hard to do that with my hands tied behind my back."

Frox held the radio close to Jonah's mouth. "Go ahead," he said, and then thumbed the mic.

Jonah hesitated. *Doreen, please remember.* "Anybody copy? Over."

Nothing. No response. No noise on the other end. He waited another ten seconds or so.

"Anybody copy? Over," Jonah said again.

After a few minutes of silence, Frox seemed to be satisfied.

"See?" Jonah said.

"That changes nothing. Sooner or later, we'll find out what we want to know."

"What are you going to do? Torture me?" Not that Jonah wanted to suggest the idea, but Frox's response would surely give him a hint of what he was in for.

Frox swallowed thickly. "We do not torture. Imprison is as far as we go."

"You're aiming a gun at me. And don't forget sacrifice."

"Now you understand why we never need to go so far as to—"

Suddenly, Perry barged through the tent flap, encompassing the empty space with his bulk. He marched inside. "Bad news."

Frox dropped the pistol's aim away from Jonah's forehead. "What happened?"

Perry glanced at Jonah briefly, but he obviously didn't care if he heard him. "You're in charge now."

"What do you mean?"

"Archard's dead."

Frox thought for a moment. "Molter?"

Perry shook his head. "One of the other prisoners."

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CHAPTER 10

Doreen wasn't breaking an agreement, something she and Jonah had settled on, not exactly; it was more like she was only bending it a little. What they'd discussed was for their safety while he was away, but going outdoors with Heike was something she would only do for a little while. Doreen had made sure all was safe to the point of her comfort, even neglecting the amount of sleep she typically preferred. That way, she could patrol around the cabin for an hour before setting foot outside with her daughter.

What drew them out was something close to a gift for it had snowed overnight. There seemed to be enough slushy white to build a snowman. It was probably the last gasp of winter, but then again, Doreen had thought the same thing after the last snowfall too. Fresh flakes could be put to productive use, in that they could make a young girl very happy, and probably wouldn't last much longer. It would likely melt into slush soon and be wasted—according to Heike—unless Doreen wanted to be a "mean mom."

It wasn't as if Doreen could hide what had fallen overnight from Heike. She would become very suspicious if her mom insisted she wear a blindfold for no reason and proceed to bump around the inside of the cabin. Not only had Heike asked whether they could build a snowman over and over and again, they had also been on her mind because she'd been doodling them for the last two days as if she sensed what would happen.

When Doreen had asked Heike why she didn't build a snowman when there was so much snow on the ground earlier in the year, she said, "It hadn't occurred to me." She'd used those exact words. She was growing up so fast. It definitely didn't harm her vocabulary that her only interactions were with adults: compassionate, understanding, caring, intelligent, and curious ones at that.

No matter what kind of slushy concoction they ended up creating, it was the best way to distract Heike for a while. That was probably why she had been so insistent, whether she truly knew it or not. Doreen wasn't the only one worried about Jonah being away, Heike was too. He'd already been gone far too long without contacting Doreen for him not to have encountered some sort of trouble, and even though he was often away for most of the day, he'd already been gone for two, and this time felt especially concerning.

It wasn't just because he hadn't ventured out on a similar mission for such a long time; it was also because he hadn't responded when Doreen had attempted radio contact. Since then, she'd decided to wait for him to contact her, which she knew he would do when it was possible. What Doreen was going through made her nostalgic for the days after Henrytown but before this one. She had felt this type of worry tug at her weak spots before, causing her stomach to sour enough for her appetite to vanish, but it had been a long time

since that happened last. Jonah had remained local for a long time.

Doreen had almost yelled at Heike when she spoke Deutsch to her, which was ridiculous; they were German, and this was Deutschland. It wasn't because speaking the language was something negative; Doreen's own mother would have objected that her granddaughter was discouraged from speaking her native language. For a while, Doreen had even speculated why she dissuaded Heike from speaking only Deutsch, even though Jonah spoke it well, but she realized, deep down, it was because of the present state of the world.

The Molting had likely begun in Europe, maybe even in Deutschland. She wasn't sure of the number of dead since the Molting began, but she suspected the English language was the one that would endure, based on the strengths of England and America but also—and most importantly—all the people who spoke English as a second language. That and Spanish. She'd heard Chinese was the most popular language, but she could just see the look on Jonah's face if she insisted he not only keep up on his Deutsch and learn to speak Spanish fluently, but also learn Chinese.

Regardless, German wasn't a priority language, even though they were in Deutschland, because all three of them already spoke it well enough. Ironically, she'd heard from someone when she was young—she couldn't remember who—that the English language actually originated from invaders from Germany long ago. For some reason, most people associated the English language with America.

Doreen was not one of those people, and her affinity for English wasn't that she was biased, being in love with an American man either; it was because of the popularity of America itself. Most Americans spoke the language, and many people from other countries were taught to speak English at school. It was only a feeling, but a strong one, and she thought that she was correct about it.

She wanted her daughter to speak two languages well and possibly learn a third. Almost everyone she had ever known spoke some English or spoke it well. Deutsch was fine while she and Heike were together, or if she wanted to speak it with Jonah on occasion, but a future rule would be she had to speak English when there were any other Americans around. To keep up on it and stay sharp.

But the main reason was actually one that pained Doreen very much. It was in case both she and Jonah were killed. That way, Heike would be able to communicate with whoever she ended up with. Most likely that person or people would at least speak some English. It was an extremely harrowing forethought, an awful one for Doreen, imagining that she wouldn't be alive to take care of her own daughter, but these were no ordinary times. Though facing an unbelievable enemy, they were living during a familiar period of human existence, and that was during a war.

The snow was soft but also crunchy underfoot as some of what was

beneath the powder was frozen from the night before. Even though the season had technically changed, the snow from winter hadn't vanished completely from the territory surrounding the cabin. And clear skies typically meant cold in these mountains no matter the time of year.

The grade of the snow was not ideal for the fun they planned, actually what Heike had planned, plotted, and talked about incessantly since they went outside, but it would do. Although it had snowed, there wasn't as much powder as they'd hoped, so Heike attempted to use chunks of what was essentially ice as a base to build on, but it was difficult enough to frustrate her, so she threw them. When the chunks landed, they burst into shards of solid wet.

After a while longer, they had somewhat completed the main body of the snowman—if that's what it could be called, more like a snow lump—and Heike continued to add the rare handfuls of fresh snow that she could find as it slowly took shape. Heike was attempting to duplicate what she had seen in children's books about how they should look. Maybe Heike had even seen one recently in one of the many books Jonah found for her when he was out searching for supplies.

"Think it's ready for some clothing?" Doreen said.

"*Ja,*" Heike said.

They didn't have to push much slush aside on the ground beneath their feet to locate some dark rocks they used for its eyes and nose and mouth. Doreen pushed an actual pipe—Jonah had found it—among the rocks of its mouth, and it made Heike laugh. Jonah didn't smoke cigarettes anymore, and he'd said he could possibly use the pipe to bargain with one day, but Doreen secretly suspected he wanted to smoke it as an older man, which was why she hadn't objected to him keeping it.

She actually loved the smell of tobacco from a pipe, but also whiskey on a man's breath. Both reminded her of masculinity, what she thought men smelled like, even if neither was healthy. The thought of Jonah sitting by the fire as an older man with a blanket on his legs, having a stiff drink—if he could handle it, knowing how he felt about alcohol, but it would be up to him—and puffs of smoke around his face as he smiled at her the way he did, it warmed her heart.

As he smoked, she would remind him that Heike was coming over to visit with her husband, someone who they both had approved of, and their children, too, and watch as Jonah attempted to mask the excitement of looking forward to that day as men often did. As if it were no big deal, but he would continue to ask about them until they arrived. She would look forward to the visit as much as he did.

Maybe even another child of theirs would be grown by then, a boy or a girl who would have children of their own, even more grandchildren to visit Doreen and Jonah when they were older people. Both she and Jonah would still be alive to speak of the Molting as a distant memory, another war from

the past, fought and done with and now under control. The grandchildren would do their best to show interest until something nice and normal distracted them, and up until that point, they could only use their imaginations to understand such horror.

"Mom?"

Heike was blurry through a film of tears, so she wiped them away. "I'm fine. I'm having fun."

"You look sad."

"I'm not."

"Happy tears?"

Sugarcoating the truth would not help her or her daughter. "Not exactly."

"What then?"

"I guess I'm worried."

"Me, too, but he'll come back. He always does."

"Yes. He does, doesn't he?" Heike smiled at her, and Doreen smiled back, swallowing her emotion. "What kind of hat should we put on him?"

The women went about deciding by rummaging through the clothing they'd meticulously arranged on the snow-covered picnic table for that very moment. There were scarves, stocking caps, trucker hats, baseball caps, and even a sombrero. Doreen suspected that soon after Jonah's return, it would be warm enough so that they could have a picnic on the table.

When Heike put the sombrero on the snowman's head, she said, "*Nein*," and removed it just as quickly.

"He definitely needs a scarf to keep warm," Doreen said, and searched until she found a red one and wrapped it around the snowman's neck. "Chilly out here."

"Do you think Jonah will like it?"

"He'll love it." Then Doreen's heart sank when she glanced down and saw what Heike had done. Her immediate reaction was to yell at her daughter, but she didn't want to ruin the day, so she held herself composed. Still she couldn't hold back her parental tone. "Take that out of there, please."

Reluctantly, Heike scraped the pistol out of the side of the snowman; the indentation looked as if it had been holstered. It was the pistol Jonah had given her. Heike blew on the gun and rubbed the slush off.

"Is it loaded?" Doreen said.

"A weapon is always loaded," Heike said.

"Is it actually loaded, though?"

"Yes."

"Remove the magazine, please."

Heike expertly thumbed the magazine release, and the magazine fell into her left hand. Then she pulled the slide, and the chambered bullet ejected and landed in her hand too.

"Jonah taught you to do that?"

"Yes." Heike stood there waiting. "Is that OK?"

"I suppose. Just be careful."

"I am," Heike said, thumbing the round back into the magazine. She put it in her jacket pocket along with the small-caliber pistol. Then she zipped the pocket shut.

Doreen almost asked her daughter to hand over the gun, but Jonah had given it to her. He trusted her, and that meant a lot to Doreen. Plus, at what age would that be appropriate? Two years from now? Ten? With current events, what was the difference? But she hated the fact that her own daughter had to grow up in a world where a child needed to carry a gun because a threat that required a gun could present itself at any moment.

Doreen remembered all the snow angels they'd made together, including a few times with Jonah, and how shortly after one of those times the Molters had attacked Henrytown. When had they been close to such danger and not even known it? Like now. Like always lately. She wished Jonah were there. Even though she could handle herself, she always felt safer with him around.

Jonah hadn't been gone long, but it was long enough for her to feel the way she did when part of her felt like it was missing. It wasn't like him to be gone overnight, but she had to remember he was a very capable man—battle hardened—against normal people and bad men and the creatures, so for now she put her worry aside. Jonah was always confident, and because of that, she needed to have confidence in him. Still she wanted him to come back home soon.

Doreen couldn't help but sense that he was in danger, but she wasn't sure how she knew. She hoped she was wrong, that she was only being worried because he was still away. Upon his return, she would make him feel guilty about the stress he had put on her and demand an apology that consisted of hugs and kisses and more. She wanted him there with them. Needed him to be too.

To Doreen there was a difference between wanting and needing but desiring both revealed just how much she loved him. And why she'd picked him. Her choice to be with Jonah was exactly that, a choice, and she had not chosen to be close to a man before Jonah since her husband died in a vehicle accident. She'd had plenty of opportunities for romance as many women did. Since it always seemed to be chilly in Deutschland, many spent time indoors, and one of men's favorite activities was to practice making babies. That was likely what every man's favorite activity was. The thought of sex made Doreen miss her man even more.

Their intimacy was something special, something they shared together, and it felt like it was unique to them, what no one else had ever experienced, and neither of them had ever been closer with anyone else. Being intimate with a man was a very serious decision for Doreen, and that was obvious to even her since she hadn't been with anyone else but Jonah since her husband had passed away.

What she and Jonah shared was beyond words. It was rare. To Doreen,

their bond felt like it could only happen once in a lifetime, even though she had been married before, because she only felt that way with Jonah. Jonah was the man for her, and she had been preoccupied with that fact a lot lately, especially since he'd gone on the mission.

Doreen had only been pregnant one other time before she'd lost the baby, and that pregnancy had resulted in Heike. She didn't like to think about the little one who died, but sometimes the thought of him just crept in. Not nearly as much as immediately after it had happened, though. She often forced herself to think of other things while in pain, but dealing with how she felt was probably necessary.

Like right now.

She was so worried about Jonah, but as she'd had to do in her past, she was able to be worried and enjoy quality time with her daughter simultaneously. It was a skill and a lesson she'd learned from Jonah himself, silently, as it was never spoken of so as not to bring out conversation about trauma unnecessarily. Jonah was a strong man but one with darkness in his past. There was no sense in knowing it all, but she'd still learned from some of it the few times he'd spoken about it.

Maybe it was because of their present circumstances—so secluded—that the loss of the little one had been so absolutely devastating. Even though Jonah was always at her side and willing to comfort her whenever and however she needed, she still felt like she was on her own about it. That didn't really make sense, but it was how she felt. Doreen didn't understand it then but realized that it was probably normal, and she would have felt the same way even if the miscarriage had happened before the Molting. How could she not? She was who she was.

From that horrible day on, more so then than now, she couldn't stop thinking about his tiny little life being cut short, not even beginning, and how he would never experience all that was so wonderful about life. It always made things worse at the thought of his name—she knew it was a boy all along. She was going to name him after her grandfather. If she ever got pregnant again, she would not use the name if the baby was going to be a boy. He had died, and for Doreen, his name had died with him.

Losing the baby was one of the worst pains she'd ever felt, but she was never exactly sure where that pain was. Inside her, around her heart and stomach. Inside her mind, yet the pain always seemed to gravitate somewhere else inside her, depending on how she was feeling that day. After mulling it over as much as she could handle, the grief going around and around and around, ricocheting all over the inside of her mind and heart for what seemed endlessly, it eventually began to subside a little more each day.

Although it felt like the loss was a long time ago, it wasn't, but at least now she felt like she could go on, when before, selfishly, she occasionally hoped to pass away during the night. She never told anyone that, not even Jonah, and she never would. Thankfully, the potency of those feelings had passed.

Doreen's feelings about everything had changed, and she felt like she was something close to her normal self again. She saw it in the eyes of her loved ones. They seemed to sense it too. Even with all that threatened them, and all the terrible things that could happen, life could still be wonderful. No matter the number of losses or hazardous quandaries they found themselves in, there was always the possibility of bonding. The best kinds were between a man and a woman, or a parent and a child.

Losing her baby was like losing an appendage, but a consoling fact was that she and Jonah could make love as much as he could handle, and then one day, she would be pregnant again. Even if she couldn't have another child, for whatever unforeseen reason, Jonah would still be there for her no matter what. Her heart was sore at the thought of him not being in her life, and in Heike's, but worrying more wasn't doing any good, even if she couldn't help it, so she focused on the moment.

Heike had finally finished dressing their snowy companion because she had stepped back and hadn't added anything else for some time. There was a perfectly shaped skinny branch for an arm with four stick fingers sticking out on one side and a crooked branch with three stick fingers sticking out on the other side. Both stick arms looked as if they were waving. Heike had decided that a baseball cap was best for a hat.

As if reading her mom's mind, Heike said, "It fits because he might want to play baseball."

"Excellent choice. Do you think he's finished?"

"Yes. Don't you?"

"I suppose."

Both stared at their creation; the fun of their interaction had made many of their worries go away for the all-too-brief time it took to build and shape the snowman. Mental escape was one of the best and healthiest ways to endure worry, danger, or hardship. That included playing in the snow, or what was left of it.

"I hope it doesn't melt before Jonah returns," Heike said.

"Me too," Doreen said. "Although our snowman is more of an iceman."

"Mom!"

"Well, he is."

"There's no such thing."

"There is now."

Heike considered that, her head momentarily tilting to the side. "When it snows the next time, I'm going to make snow*men*!"

"Wow. That's ambitious."

"You should have named me that."

"What? *Ambitious?*"

"Yes."

"Instead of Heike?"

"Yes."

Doreen laughed at her daughter's humor. *How fast they grow up.*

"Do you think Jonah will help with our snowmen?" Heike said.

"I'm sure he will. But we might have to wait until next winter. I'm not sure how much more it will snow." Doreen glanced over at Heike. She could see that worry was tugging at Heike just as much as herself. "He'll be back soon. I'm sure of it."

Heike smiled, but it faded, and Doreen saw worry return to her face. Heike tried to hide her feelings by stepping forward, just barely out of view of her mom, toward the snowman. Then she took a step back.

"Mom, get away from it."

Doreen felt a puzzled expression flash over her face until she saw what Heike was referring to. There was movement that caused both of them to take involuntary steps backward, very slowly, across the powdery, slushy snow.

As the shiny black legs appeared on top of their iceman's baseball cap, Heike slowly removed the pistol from her jacket pocket, pushed the clip in snugly, pulled the slide, chambering the first round, and allowed it to go forward again. Then she took the safety off, cocked the hammer, and took a confident step forward.

For what seemed like a minute, Doreen felt paralyzed, and then when she felt the adrenaline coursing through her, she almost demanded the gun from her daughter. But then she thought better of it. Not only did she remember that she was confident in Heike, but she was also confident in Jonah's teaching. "Not too close," she said.

"I don't want to miss," Heike said.

"Are you going to attach a silencer?"

"I don't want to take my eyes off it. I'll only fire once. One shot, one kill."

Heike didn't seem to be afraid of the thing that looked very much like a spider. It had a slight body, and the entire thing was practically only legs. That and small teeth at its center as its only purpose for existing was to launch, grapple onto, and infect a host. Doreen remembered what had happened at Henrytown, when Heike was practically defenseless because of her age. She was a very different little girl today as many children probably were now. If they were still living, then they were growing up to be warriors.

The Infector wasn't crawling, but it definitely knew where its potential hosts were standing before it. It aimed itself at them, no doubt waiting for either one of them to get close enough for it to jump onto and sink its small, yellow, infected teeth into flesh to begin a molt.

Afterward, if it were successful, the Infector would die having served its only purpose. That wasn't a factor for this one in particular because it wasn't going to get that chance. Not with someone taught by Jonah Browne with a pistol aimed and ready to shoot.

Heike didn't blink. "Do you see any others?"

"No," Doreen said.

"Do you think it's the last one?"

“From the Infector bomb? I believe so. Others would have shown themselves by now, I think. But we should assume it isn’t the last one for our safety. That’s what Jonah would advise.”

“I agree,” Heike said, and then she squeezed the trigger, firing one round, just as Jonah had taught her, and the Infector disappeared from view.

After peeking around the snowman, it had fallen belly up behind it onto the melting slush, seeming to get smaller as its legs curled inward, and it died.

Heike scanned the area, carefully aware of the muzzle of the pistol as it was now aiming at the ground, her finger no longer on the trigger, and when no other dangers presented themselves, she bent down and rolled the bullet casing, which *sizzled* atop the icy snow before she picked it up.

Suddenly there was a male voice coming from Doreen’s pocket. It startled both of them enough to cause them to jump. *“Anybody copy? Over.”*

Heike’s eyes got big. “Mom, it’s him!”

Doreen was already digging into her pocket. “I know, honey. Oh thank you. Thank you, thank you.” Fumbling for the radio, she pulled it out, brought it to her mouth . . . but then hesitated. Her smile faded.

“What’s wrong, Mom?”

“Shh.”

Doreen held the radio out in front of her, inspecting it, waiting . . .

“Anybody copy? Over.”

What were they supposed to do? Go somewhere else? The best thing for them, although dangerous, was to do nothing. To stay put. Even though part of her thought they should get in the truck that was ready for this exact scenario and drive away. But where?

“Heike, get your things; we’re going inside.”

“Why Mom? Why didn’t you answer him?”

“Because he’s in trouble. Now do as I say!”

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CHAPTER 11

After hearing of Archard's death, Frox's demeanor changed almost immediately. It definitely wasn't grief. Jonah had no idea how close the two were or how well they knew each other or if they were even friends at all. Maybe they only worked together. The shift in behavior was hazily familiar to Jonah but recognizable, similar to when he'd witnessed the next in line of a chain of command assume power. For Frox it seemed welcome. Even expected.

Perry shook Frox's hand. It was obvious Perry wasn't that close with Archard either, and Frox reached up and patted him on one of his massive shoulders. The veil of power fit over Frox as if he were born with it on. It fit him like a snug, comfortable jacket.

"What about the Draw?" Perry said.

Frox looked directly at Jonah. "It's in good hands."

Great, Jonah thought.

Archard, the one Jonah had heard about—and heard enough about that he had already decided he would have eliminated him if he could have—had been killed by another prisoner. Whoever that prisoner was must have been a serious threat because of how Archard was regarded: respected but also feared. Jonah didn't know the specifics of what went down, but it was clear whoever had killed Archard was still a threat, which meant he or she was still alive.

Since Perry had delivered the news, and Frox had assumed his new role, Frox whispered something to Perry, and Perry grabbed Jonah's machete off the table close by and then both Frox and Perry disappeared outside the tent. Seemed further discussion of events would consist of hushed whispers. If Jonah didn't escape soon, Frox's men would find the cabin. Eventually. And again. It was only a matter of time.

Jonah felt lucky no one had communicated its discovery to the rest of the group. It showed their inexperience, but also, they clearly weren't expecting to run into anyone out in the forest as they searched. Jonah had been fortunate he showed up when he had. Even though Doreen had done the shooting.

The next time something like that happened, it would probably be a sweep. Everything anybody would ever want for survival was there, and if they discovered Jonah's authentic map and deciphered his burial method that was thirty-one paces north, south, east, or west of the actual burial locations according to which direction he was from the cabin . . .

His burial method was a contingency in case that real map was discovered, and he'd chosen the number of paces because it was random. He'd actually chosen the number because the amount of work he was doing to keep his people safe had reminded him of how Jonah had assured Henry he would.

Thirty-one was also the number of Behemoths Henry claimed to have killed when Jonah first met him on the road.

The likelihood of the map being discovered and also deciphered wasn't great, but Jonah still couldn't waste precious time. He had too much to lose, and he couldn't allow any other precarious situations with more trespassers. These weren't the good folks from Henrytown. Frox, Perry, and their people were selfish and desperate, and it was clear they would do anything to survive.

A lot like Jonah himself at a certain point in his life, but moral roads often go in different directions. Some ascended into normalcy and selflessness as his own had, but others had surely descended into savagery and rapidly, as fast as a fully loaded semitruck flooring it full speed downhill with its brakes cut.

Ironically, Jonah, Doreen, and Heike had been relatively safe from Molters since they had arrived at the cabin because of Jonah's clearing, but now they were susceptible to another threat entirely, a very unexpected one, which was their fellow man. Jonah needed to get out of there—not just the tent but away from Frox and his people—and fast. Period. There were no other decisions for him to make.

Frox abruptly threw the flap of the tent open and marched toward Jonah as if his assumption of power had already changed him into a different person.

Jonah remained as calm as when he was getting chewed out by a superior while serving his country. "You look happy."

Frox reddened. "You shouldn't provoke me."

"You're just going to kill me anyway. Get it over with."

"You haven't been paying attention."

That was where Frox was dead wrong. Jonah had been paying strict attention, and his attempt to provoke Frox was about to pay off. Frox was going to slip up and reveal a way to allow Jonah to escape, and he wouldn't even know he'd done it until Jonah was gone. All they had done so far was threaten him. Frox had already admitted they didn't torture. If they were actually going to kill him, they would have already done it. Not that Jonah believed they wouldn't kill him if he pushed enough, but he suspected they needed him for the Draw, however that worked, and that wasn't happening at the moment as far as he could tell, which meant he had time to plot.

Jonah stared up at him. "Why chat with me?"

"Even though you won't be alive for much longer," Frox said, "you deserve to know why."

Obviously to clear your conscience, Jonah thought. "OK. Why?"

"Because the hell with this world."

If Jonah could have rolled his eyes without interrupting Frox's precious spiel, giving Jonah more time to further his plan, he would have. "Say again?"

Shit, Jonah thought. *Military jargon. Hopefully Frox hadn't noticed.* It would be difficult to convince anyone who recognized such language that the person phrasing it that way hadn't been in the military.

"It's been trying to kill us off since our beginning," Frox said.

If Frox had recognized the phrase, he hadn't reacted, and Jonah was able to relax somewhat. If they knew everything about him, they'd probably kill him. They would understand he was too much of a threat to be left alive as a mere prisoner.

"It?" Jonah said.

"Nature," Frox said. "Can't make up its mind. Always trying to come up with something better to take us out and replace us."

"But you said the Molting was population control."

"Many planets are meant for life, but which kind is best for each? Who knows? The Molting is a biological infection to humans, like a virus, and all cells are replaced. The monstrous results live only to kill, diminish the masses, and our planet seems intent on replacing us with them. Maybe they are something . . . better than us for Earth. More controllable. It's not like Molters are going to push industrialization."

"I'm not sure what's going on."

"I just told you."

"Then *you* don't understand."

Frox's bushy eyebrows knit together. "What don't I understand?"

"That nothing is a fact except the fact that many things about this planet are changing," Jonah said. "Even *they* are unalike now. And I actually suspect they're turning on each other."

"Why do you think that?"

"Release me and I'll mail you a letter with an explanation. I find I can express myself better when I write down my thoughts as opposed to pointless conversation."

"Do you ever tire of being annoying?"

"Do you ever tire of being an arrogant prick?"

Frox stared at Jonah for a few seconds as if he couldn't believe what he'd heard, that anyone who dared to speak to him that way was playing with fire . . . but he eventually chuckled. It was an act, though. Then he seemed to be debating whether he would kill Jonah and how, Draw be damned. But then he seemed to calm down.

It was obvious to Jonah that Frox could take slight jabs, and that meant he hadn't been in power much throughout his life. No, Frox had likely spent most of his time as an underling, but he was strong willed, so Jonah would be wise not to jab too much, pull his punches mostly, and only go for a figurative haymaker when he was positive he could connect.

"This threat, it might not last," Jonah said. "It's just something else we have to endure. Until the next thing. Typically, it's us versus them, whoever *they* are, and by *they*, I mean people, typically, but that's not what's happening this time. I mean, it is, but now we have a much deadlier enemy that we're facing as well as one another."

Jonah wasn't too keen on conversing with Frox, a man who might very well end his life, but maybe Jonah could start an argument. Or somehow

create an alliance. Or just allow Frox to think that was happening. Frox was harder to read than most. One of the reasons was whenever he spoke, Jonah couldn't see his mouth moving because his mustache covered it. It was similar to someone wearing sunglasses while playing poker. In a way that was what was going on, but Frox wasn't the only one holding cards. Jonah held a hand too.

I'll let you think I'm actually focused on this conversation, offering my hypotheses while I figure a way out of here. "I don't think they're here to replace us," Jonah said.

"Why then?" Frox asked with actual interest.

"Earth's resources."

"I don't follow."

"We need them. They don't."

Frox thought for a moment. "Gold is needed? Coffee?"

"*We* use those."

"Our blood isn't a resource?"

"In a way, I suppose. But then all meat, all tissue is a resource."

"It is."

"I know that, Dietrich, but I'm talking about the resources put here on this planet specifically *for us*. It's proof we belong here."

"I don't buy it, *Jonah*. Just think of any animal . . . ants, birds, fuckin' . . . whatever. They all probably have their versions of use. Shit, really? That's all you got? It could be argued that a fucking beaver belongs on this planet more than we do. Think of all the resources *it* uses."

Jonah didn't expect that and laughed. "True, I guess. But how about our ability to make fire? The fact that it exists in a controllable way and doesn't cause a fucking explosion when it sparks . . . and seriously, *coffee*? It's the most wonderful . . . Are you going to deny that it's the most amazing and delicious—"

"I'm with you on that one." Frox cut him off. "Coffee is a gift from the gods. There's no debating that."

As the two men smiled at each other, it was likely the only moment in their lives when they would be in agreement or even close to being friendly.

Jonah forced his smile to fade. "Perhaps you're right, though. I don't know anything for certain. I've just been doing my best to wrap my head around the Molting since it began. What I do know, and this is the only thing I'm positive of, is that if we don't fight our best, they will wipe us out, and then Molters will be the next dominant lifeform on this planet regardless of whatever conclusions you or I or anyone else comes up with."

Frox was grinning at him for some reason. It was a little jarring because Jonah didn't know why he was doing it, but he finished his thought anyway.

"If we don't stick together, in a few years—a hundred, or maybe a thousand—we'll all be gone, and they'll be here, and then *they* will have to survive whatever nature decides on to make their lives complicated."

"I'm glad you mentioned that," Frox said.

"Which part? About us sticking together?" *Hopefully*, Jonah thought.

"No. About us fighting our best. See, that isn't enough. This is a threat that needs to be outsmarted."

That's what I meant, asshole.

"Nature?" Frox said, reflecting on his own hypotheses. "It isn't concerned with who lives or dies or which species is the dominant one. One thing Molters got on us is they hibernate, and we can't. They can wait us out. This world, nature, whatever, it's given us some real competition, meaning that it doesn't mind if we fade away. I have a big problem with that."

A familiar engine sounded outside the tent. One Jonah knew very well, and for a few seconds, he relaxed because it gave him a feeling of home, hearing Henry's truck pull up and park. Except he knew someone else, a stranger, had gotten out of it. Jonah even recognized the way the truck vibrated the ground so knowing it was out there, even under such shitty circumstances, comforted him. Regardless of who had been driving. That was more than a little confusing.

Then he felt boot steps vibrate through the ground as more men jumped out of its bed. The familiar voice of Perry belted out orders, and then, seconds later, he eclipsed the opening of the tent, shoving the flap aside like it was an annoying bug. Someone outside held it open. When Perry saw Jonah, a menacing half smile appeared through his thick salt-and-pepper beard.

This can't be good, Jonah thought.

Frox held a hand up, obviously a command that the men wait. He turned back to Jonah. "Enough existential discussion. Here's a revised deal. Just tell us where your supplies are, a precise location, and I'll allow you to live."

"You'll let me go?"

"No. That's impossible."

"Nothing's impossible, Dietrich."

"That's not true. You out there somewhere means it's impossible to trust you won't harm any of my people. Unfortunately, you'll have to stay with us and work. But you'll be alive. Isn't that what really matters?"

Frox really means it. Jonah had been lied to enough times to recognize the difference. The answer to Frox's question was yes and no. "Doing what?" he said.

"I've yet to determine that. Now, the location of your supplies, so my guys can get there quick, load up, get back safe, and get it all over with."

Whatever that entailed would not benefit Jonah and his people one bit. So, because Jonah had nothing else to say, and Frox could obviously sense that, he turned and nodded. Perry and other men who appeared behind him walked into the tent.

Perry looked down at Jonah as if he were an Infector he was about to squash with a heavy steel-toed boot. "You're the one we were looking for, fucker. You killed our people. I know it was you. Where'd you put the

bodies?"

Jonah gave Perry's big round shaved head a thousand-yard stare.

"Probably close to home, huh?"

As Jonah and his friend Eric had learned during their brief stint in college, some guys just couldn't take a joke. With Perry's bulk, obvious strength, and bullying demeanor, Jonah already knew hardly anyone had ever challenged him physically. Who would? But Jonah was also betting hardly anyone had ever messed with his head.

"Hey dumbass, your fort doesn't have a roof," Jonah said.

"What the f—? Forts don't have roofs! You're the dumbass." Perry was clearly ready to become angry. His temper continued. "Think you're the only one who can track? We were waiting for whoever it was who killed our people. Turned out that was you."

A bluff. Perry knew nothing for certain. Jonah had been ambushed, but they hardly knew anything about him, and he was going to keep it that way. For all Jonah knew, Perry was only fishing for information so Jonah might slip up and admit to something they only assumed he'd done. Jonah decided to ask Perry a question he already knew the answer to. That way, he could continue to evade their questioning.

"Does your fort have a bathroom?" Before Perry could say anything, Jonah said to him, "Never mind. Not like you're in charge." And as Perry was reacting to that, Jonah said, "Frox! Let me retain a little dignity. Let me piss on some snow before we go wherever we're headed."

"Again?"

"That was hours ago. I got a weak bladder. I admit it. It's my only weakness."

Frox grinned at him and nodded to an underling. "Sure. But you dash, and you know what will happen."

"I thought we covered that."

"Just wanted to remind you."

One of them clipped the plastic zip tie holding Jonah's hands together behind his back. It was the third one put on him since he had to urinate the first time and uncomfortably tighter than the last. Once off, the tension vanished, and his hands warmed with instant relief. He brought them around from behind him and massaged his sore wrists, cracking his knuckles and shaking his hands out as if they were sorer than they actually were.

"And remember this, too," Perry said, taking a confident step closer to him. "You try anything, do anything stupid, and I'll punch you so hard you'll go into the past. That way, you'll forget your lies, repeat them, and that'll give me the chance to knock your dumb ass out again."

Jonah snickered and stood, still having to look up at him. "Speaking of stupid, how long have you been waiting to say that to somebody?"

"Oh, I've said it before."

"I bet you have."

Perry smirked. “Run. Go ahead. I actually want you to . . . so I can shoot ya . . . or one of these guys will.”

“No shit,” Jonah said, still massaging his wrists, allowing them to think he was actually recovering from pain he couldn’t handle. “I’m not going to run, dummy. Just gotta piss. Pay attention.”

Perry’s smirk grew into a broad smile that was a sharp contrast to his murderous posture. Perfect, Jonah thought. But he also realized how dangerous some plans were, or aspects of them, like provoking a dangerous man like Perry because he looked like he was debating strangling Jonah to death.

When Jonah walked out of the tent, he didn’t realize how stiff and sore he actually would be. He hadn’t been thinking about it, but it was from sitting in one position for so long. The entrance of the fort—Jonah thought of it as the exit—had been the only thing on his mind since he came to. There were armed guards everywhere, above and on the ground, but he noticed their focus was outward so that no one, and nothing, could get in.

If he made his move now, realistically, because of his previous immobility, it would only be an unimpressive fast jog at first, so he moved as slowly as they probably expected someone who had given up to do. Jonah didn’t have to urinate; that had been a lie, one of a few lately. He’d already been allowed to go a few hours before, and his bladder felt empty, but he still made his way to the closest bush.

It was the one nearest to the open tailgate of Henry’s truck, where Perry had placed Jonah’s machete along with his other belongings. Put there for everyone’s safety. It was a good distance away, about thirty feet or so. As Jonah assumed the position to relieve himself, he spun rapidly and then sprinted for it.

“What the hell are you doing?” Perry shouted. “We got guns, you idiot!”

Already there and turning toward the angry voice, Jonah ripped the machete out of the sheath and flung it. Perry quickly ducked but it still managed to clip his ear—Jonah had been aiming for his throat—and then it sunk into one of the trees that held Perry’s fort together. Perry’s ear dripped blood, and Jonah was soon seized by men who’d surrounded him.

It was what Jonah had been expecting to happen, but he thought there was a slim chance he’d spot an opportunity to get away because it would be so unexpected. What kind of lunatic who wanted to live would risk his life by running with so many guns aimed at him and no way out? Someone like Jonah, who was trained to rely on instincts, that’s who, and now he was positive they weren’t going to kill him yet.

They were going to use him for the Draw, and remaining defiant would allow him to possess his secrets longer. That had only been the backup plan, though. Running away, simply, was his best opportunity to escape because if he made it to that tree line, they’d never find him. And anyone who set foot in there after him would be a dead man.

Except he'd failed.

"He's a fucking animal, he is!" Perry roared, holding his bleeding ear. "Look what he did to my ear!" he said to Frox.

"I was aiming for your throat," Jonah said with as much cockiness as he could muster. He would never miss an opportunity to agitate an underling. Even one of Perry's size.

"Yeah? Well, you missed, cocksucker!"

Perry marched to where the machete was embedded, yanked it out, and turned as if he might throw it back at Jonah. Or maybe walk up to him and stab him with it. The men who held Jonah in place stepped around nervously.

"Perry," Frox said.

Perry held the machete up, his eyes raging behind it. "You're not ever getting this back!"

"Fine," Jonah said. "Not my best one anyway. The blade's dull. That's why I wasted it on you."

Perry huffed angrily and walked back to where the blade had been stuck before he'd yanked it out and chopped it back into the fort. Breathing heavily and angry, Perry turned and glared at Frox, his eyebrows and hands raising up together as an unspoken question. Frox eyed him a moment and then gave a reluctant nod, the answer Perry was hoping for because it made him smile, and he slowly approached where the other men were holding Jonah in place.

Perry brought a heavy fist back; waited, making sure Jonah knew what was coming; and then actually did knock him out.

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CHAPTER 12

When Jonah came to, his hands and feet were hogtied with rope. He lay on his stomach near the gate of a speeding pickup truck. He couldn't tell whose truck it was, but it wasn't Henry's. He could feel the cold of the stony metal through his jacket. He struggled to move his head and saw the boots of the men sitting around the truck bed guarding him. Then he turned and saw Frox, the only man clearly in his view, sitting against the back of the cab, rocking to the bumps from the road. Jonah couldn't have been more angry with himself. Here he was, immobile and tied up, being transported to his imminent death. Hopefully, Doreen didn't think he'd abandoned her.

No, she wouldn't think that because he wouldn't do that. Not to them. Not to anyone. He'd made mistakes in his past but ones he'd learned from. Just like at Henrytown, he would never leave his people behind again.

"You stupid bastard," Perry said from out of Jonah's view. "You tried to take my head off. How about a little gratitude?"

Jonah couldn't see Perry, but he could see his boots. They were the ones nearest to him. "For punching me in the face? Yeah, thanks."

"For keeping you alive."

"I've kept myself alive."

"If you only knew the truth."

"What the hell are you talking about?"

"Perry," Frox said, and shook his head.

"He should know." There was slight pleading in Perry's tone, but he obviously respected Frox's new authority. "Everyone should."

"It's my place to explain," Frox said.

A subtle moment of trepidation crossed Frox's face because of what Perry had said. It wasn't fear, but something close to that, fear of what might happen next and the kind of reaction a man had when he had to be tough toward someone he didn't want to, and that someone was thinking about challenging him. Frox and Perry were obviously friends, so the evolution of their roles was probably quite awkward. It was probably similar to how Jonah had to behave toward his best friend, Eric, while in Oberstein. How Jonah had to take charge even though he didn't want to. It had changed the dynamic of their friendship.

"Can't wait to hear this," Jonah said.

"There's an army of *them* always on the attack. So many they would kill us all," Frox said.

"Unless?"

"Unless we take precautions."

"And the Draw is that precaution?"

"One of them. We naturally attract them, so what better way to take them

out?"

"You use people as bait."

"A person who is tied up, flailing, panicking, often wailing—it's no different to them than one they have to hunt down except from their perspective it's an easier kill. And just like any predator, they will kill the weak and immobile first."

"They just keep coming," Perry said. "No one ever accused them of being geniuses."

"That allows us to eliminate stragglers, ones we miss from the main offensive," Frox said. "People laid bare draw them in, expose them to our gunmen in waiting."

"It isn't just us that attracts them. Their own kind does too," Jonah said. "People will die from exposure eventually, and someone on display is very enticing to an Infector . . . Ah, so, which is more effective: using a person, *your own species*, against his or her will—?"

"*His* will," Perry said. "Always men, never women."

"How decent of you," Jonah said to Perry's boots. "Or is it more effective to use a Molter?"

"Molters naturally crowd together en masse so they're often difficult to capture," Frox said, and hesitated as if he didn't want to say more about that in particular. "But we all know they can be created."

Jonah did his best not to let his revulsion show. "So you start off with a person, who attracts Molters, and then they're either killed by one of them, die some other way, or an Infector bites them, and they molt. And everyone knows Molters are attracted to Molters. Am I missing anything?"

"Oh yeah. But it's gonna be a surprise," Perry said.

Jonah just *loved* the way he'd said that. "And you're going to murder me the same way? I'd rather you just put a bullet in my head right now."

"Oh, I—we—would love to," Perry said. "Got plans for you, though. Worse than your imaginings."

"Coward."

Perry kicked Jonah in the ribs, and the air went out of his lungs. Those around Perry laughed as Jonah coughed and struggled to catch his breath. Jonah hadn't been expecting that. He thought they wouldn't mistreat him because of what they had planned for him or that Frox would interfere and control Perry. But even Frox was probably smart to stay out of his way. Maybe because of what was planned for Jonah, it didn't matter anymore.

Deep down, Jonah always knew he would have to deal with other people eventually. Before those men had showed up at the cabin, he honestly thought—naïvely—that everyone would be on the same side. Nothing like how it actually was, with people having turned on one another to survive. Then again maybe it was always that way. And, on an even deeper level, Jonah had probably always known it too. The best example of how much he distrusted his own kind was how hard he had worked at hiding supplies and weapons at

the burial sites.

Jonah could finally breathe well enough to speak. “Untie me and try that,” he croaked.

Perry harrumphed. “You deserved it. You know it.”

“Good to know what kind of men I’m dealing with.”

“Don’t forget.”

“I always remember.”

“You got yourself down there. Remember that too.”

“Don’t kick him again,” Frox commanded.

“Why not use some kind of animal for the Draw instead? Like a deer?” Jonah said.

“You think we didn’t consider that?” Perry said.

“Anything other than how we do it is unproven,” Frox said.

“Trust me,” Jonah said. “They like deer.”

“We don’t trust a damn thing you say,” Perry said.

“You could breed deer or anything else that moves around with blood in their veins,” Jonah said. “Anything would be better than turning on your own species.”

“Not reliably,” Frox said.

Jonah shook his head in disbelief. “Where are we going?” he said to Frox.

Perry answered. “The firing line.”

“Of what?”

“The battle of all battles.”

“Sounds like something I want to take part in.”

Perry couldn’t hide his malicious tone. “You will.”

“Know this,” Frox said. “What happens next, your contribution to the Draw is appreciated. Even if we all think you’re a son of a bitch. Your participation will save lives and keep many of our people safe.”

“I’m honored. But what I don’t understand is . . .” Jonah struggled to move his hands behind his back. “Untie me!”

No one made a move to do anything close to that. Only Frox and Perry had the power to make such a decision happen. The only movement by anyone was the jostling of uncontrolled motion by the truck driving over the many imperfections of a poorly maintained road.

“What?” Jonah shouted. “You all afraid of me? Just one man among all you?”

“We’re not afraid of you,” Perry said. “You ran. Remember?”

“I’m not going to do that again,” Jonah lied. “I give you my word. Just tie me up again before we get to wherever the hell we’re going. Think I’m going to jump out of a moving vehicle?”

“Probably.”

“I’d like to be comfortable as we talk. All of you have guns. I don’t. Man up.”

“Untie him,” Frox said.

"What?" Perry said.

"You heard me."

Perry exhaled dramatically. Reluctantly, he carefully untied the rope that hogtied Jonah. Jonah noticed he didn't cut the rope, which obviously meant they might tie him up the same way again. Whether he would be hogtied again or twisted in some other uncomfortable fashion was keeping him in the worst kind of suspense.

When the ropes were off him completely, he heard himself sigh with relief and felt his legs flop onto the bed. He pushed himself upward very slowly and carefully, his shoulder joints quite sore, but he also didn't want another kick to the gut or a bullet in the head if he annoyed them so much that Frox changed his mind about keeping him alive.

"Give him some room," Frox said.

The men didn't move from where they sat, but they did shuffle their booted feet around, faking as if they were doing something. At least they didn't get any closer to him. Jonah got himself upright, and then he sat as comfortably as possible, rubbing his sore wrists—they were actually starting to hurt now between the zip ties and the ropes that had been tied tautly.

"Thank you," Jonah said.

Frox was only a few feet away from him. Jonah could get ahold of him if he moved quickly enough. Might even be able to kill him with an uppercut to the nose like he had that mouthy blond idiot and then surprise the others by grabbing one of them, pushing him off, and landing on top of him to break his fall.

If only Perry weren't among them. Even though Frox was in charge, and Jonah didn't hesitate to mess with Perry, a physical altercation with him was something else entirely. Perry was not the type of man you wanted to tangle with. He would likely take Frox's place of leadership within seconds if Jonah weren't successful in taking out both of them.

Jonah would need to disarm one of the guards he was closest to, kill the others with that weapon—including Perry and Frox—and that would all have to happen before they could return fire and within the close quarters of the truck bed. The plan would likely fail. There were too many of them, too many fingers resting on triggers, and also too many other variables. None of it was in Jonah's control, so he decided he wouldn't take action yet.

"We close?" Jonah said.

"You in a hurry?" Perry said. "You shouldn't be."

"Whatever you guys got planned, I'd rather get to it."

"Trust me, you don't."

"Right. I'd much rather delay my death. That way I can think about it more."

"You're not the only smart guy. That's for my ear."

No one in the truck bed had been in the military, so they hadn't been stamped with that mind frame for the rest of their lives. They didn't know

what Jonah did, how when taken by the enemy you weren't supposed to give up any information other than name, rank, and serial number, and they were going along with what he wanted them to whether they knew it or not.

Perry believed Jonah to be suffering, and Jonah would allow him to think that way. He'd been in much worse places than riding in the back of a pickup truck to a battle with an unforeseen outcome. Given everything he'd been through, his training, but also simple math, all the men in the back of this truck would likely die before Jonah would.

"So how many people have you all murdered?" Jonah said.

"The Draw kills them," Frox said.

"What's the difference?"

Perry watched Frox shake his head slowly. Perry must have realized Jonah was only trying to provoke them.

"We're still here, right?" Frox said. "Still alive."

"So am I. But I haven't had to kill my fellow man."

"Bullshit," Perry said.

At least not since the war and up until a few days ago. Jonah ignored him. "Better others than your own, huh? Slaughter good people who mean nothing to you? It's a wonder any of you idiots are still alive."

Perry leaned forward. "Shut your—"

"Don't let him get to you," Frox said to Perry.

"I'm about to put a gag in his mouth."

"You untied me. I'd just take it out," Jonah said.

"I mean after I tie you back up again!"

Jonah rolled his eyes. "Why not make a stand, you fucking pussies? Everybody has to fight in this day and age. Put them all down and be done with it."

Everyone in the back of the pickup truck scoffed at the same time. Jonah was OK with saying some things that some might deem crazy or even ridiculous. Let them wonder about his mental state all they wanted. It was just plain true that hardly anyone went out of their way or even wanted to converse with a crazy person. Jonah could finally see well enough, but he couldn't tell where they were going.

With endless forest and snow-covered peaks in the distance, it was difficult to recognize the territory unless he'd been there, which he hadn't. They were on a main road of sorts, and the trees occasionally broke up on his left and right to reveal hills in the distance. If they were headed somewhere Molters could be fought, where a battle could be controlled, it would likely be an open landscape.

Perry was staring down at Jonah as if he were a naïve child. "You're like one of those old-timers who refuses to leave somewhere that's dangerous even though deep down they know they're going to die if they stay."

"You know, it would be a lot easier if you said things that made sense," Jonah said, and one of the men near Perry snickered.

"Ever wonder why these mountains aren't overrun? Because we've been holding them off for years. We've been saving your ass, wherever the hell you've been hiding like a coward."

Jonah felt his cheeks flush and anger boil in his belly, but he didn't take the bait. He had been expecting Perry to antagonize him in return. Talking shit was almost always a two-way street. Knowing that still couldn't diminish how much he wanted to throw fists.

"We fight them every day. You've been drafting us, man." Perry thumbed at his chest. "We've kept Molters off your back."

"I've killed quite a few."

"Well, every once in a while, some get through our defenses."

"You're forgetting Behemoths and how they're born."

"Easy to spot if you know what you're looking for."

"Easy? Hardly."

"For us, anyway. We got quite a few terrific marksmen among us."

"If you're being overwhelmed by them, why stay?"

"We haven't. We've been on the move."

"But how long have you been here?"

Perry was about to answer but looked to Frox instead. Jonah didn't see it, but Frox must have shaken his head.

"Can't count, huh?" Jonah said. "Shocker."

"Fuck off," Perry growled.

"Jonah, you've been secluded for too long," Frox said. "Where can we go? What can we really do differently? Best thing for us is to stick with what we know how to do and what we know works. Fortify and stand our ground."

"What's the endgame?" Jonah said.

"That all of them pass us by. Someday. Then we move somewhere else."

Not likely, Jonah thought. The only way to win this war was as he'd said, to put them all down, but he wasn't about to argue with men who didn't care if he lived or died. Though he knew they were his enemy, what Frox and Perry were telling him did make sense. The cabin had been relatively peaceful, other than the Behemoth cocoons he was forced to destroy because they grew in the area or the occasional Molters that ventured into his controlled territory. Or the ones that just happened to be waiting underground in a cave. *Evil fuckers.*

"What happens to the Draw?" Jonah said.

"A loaded gun in a closet," Frox said. "Just in case."

Jonah nodded. "I'm willing to negotiate now."

The men around him gave dramatic reactions with snickering, sneers, and mocking or just straight out profanity under their breath.

"See?" Perry said to Frox. "Told you he'd crack." Frox didn't react. "I'll tell you this, Jonah. Whatever supplies you got belong to us now."

"Only if you let me go."

"Tell us where it all is so we can put it to use," Frox said.

"Once you release me, I'll leave you a map."

"You're lying," Perry said.

"I promise you I'm not. I give you my word." Jonah was technically telling the truth, but the map he'd give them would be the fake one hidden under the seat of Henry's truck, leading to only empty tarps buried beneath the marked spots. "I'll even go with whoever you send so it can be verified. Then I'll disappear, and none of you will ever see me again. I'll just leave and go mind my own business somewhere."

"Crazy fuck," Perry said rhetorically. "Where is it?"

"Wouldn't be all of it if he's that easy to convince," one of them said.

Easy, huh? But Jonah wasn't about to plead his case or argue with anyone other than Frox or Perry.

"That's actually a good point," Perry said. "Give us your map and tell us where *all* your supplies are; otherwise, it's going to be wasted. All of us know how long it takes to gather supplies and weapons. It will have been for nothing. I'm sure even *you* don't want that."

Perry waited, but Jonah was done talking. He'd set his terms, and it was up to them to follow through or not. Either that or he was going to kill as many of them as possible and escape. They hadn't tied him up again.

Perry harrumphed. "You think you're better than us, don't you? Let me explain something to you—you're just like the rest of us. And like anyone, in one way or another, you can be stripped to the bone."

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CHAPTER 13

They arrived at a sprawling golden field splashed with snow, and hills stretched beyond as far as the eye could see. It was a sea of land, and Jonah was sure his infinity view was the result of day coming to an end, the limits of vision capped where darkness already reached. Though he'd never been there, he recognized it as ground used for the German Army's artillery training.

There were trenches dug into the terrain, far enough away from the firing line to be used effectively and similar to another war long ago in another century. The firing line itself was an impressive defensive position, and Jonah had no doubt he would eventually witness its offensive capabilities. And Jonah thought *he* had acquired a lot of weapons.

Aside from howitzers capable of firing artillery, there were dozens of towers, makeshift builds made of wood that looked to be thirty feet in the air, and manned machine guns on top of every one of them. Between the towers, there were walls made of sharpened trees similar to the ones at Fort Perry although not as high.

Jonah suspected Fort Perry had been built afterward and applied the lessons learned here. It was obvious why the position worked; it looked to be a constant, well-armed assault with a steady rotation of people armed to the teeth, and Molters couldn't attack at all times. They also needed rest.

Armed men and women walked on the ground as well and aimed where the threats would soon reveal themselves. No weapons were firing, which meant daylight still held some advantages. There were breaks on this battlefield during the war, which meant the offensive not only worked well but was also reliable. It drew the Molters in, and these people killed them. Molters mostly showed up at night because they preferred to hunt in darkness, were driven to hide among the shadows, instinctually, as many predators did. It meant they had keener eyesight than whoever they were molted from.

A training ground also meant there was a military base nearby, one Jonah had never been to, but as much as he had sifted through others the last few years, he was confident he could locate wherever it was based on the proximity of the training ground and get what he needed if he had to. But that was only if it hadn't been cleaned out already. Most likely, it had been looted, but he always had a knack for finding supplies of value no matter how small or insignificant. Like chem lights.

If he survived this, he might actually use all those chem lights—meant to see in the dark—and wave them around for a dance party with frenetic music, like at the club in Oberstein before the Molting, in celebration. He would bet both Doreen and Heike would be up for some serious wiggling once he returned to them.

Then Jonah saw something that altered his evolving plan to party and

realized that escaping with his life should remain his primary, immediate goal and the only step toward a world with him in it. There were cells, but instead of people inside them, which was what he had expected, there were Molters. He'd already known they were an aspect of the Draw, but there was another layer to it that meant time for him was shorter than he had planned. All Jonah's posturing had bought him some time, but it was quickly running out.

Jonah wondered whether the Molters were trapped and then put inside, or people had been forced in while normal and then molted. If it was the latter, that gave him just a little more time, but it would mean they intended for him to molt. He'd killed many Infectors before and would do so again, but if they were going to put him inside one of the cells with a Molter already inside . . .

Not good.

Squinting, he couldn't tell if the beastly occupants were alive or dead because they weren't moving. Once again, it occurred to him that he might need glasses. Might be a little late for that, though. It was strange to see Molters during daylight hours, especially while they were caged. It was similar to seeing a lion pacing the inside of an enclosure at a zoo. Even if the Molters were immobile, it was unnatural. They were probably resting, waiting to howl until the rest of them arrived.

From the distance, it looked as if they were in the hibernation stasis he'd seen them in before, which meant they probably weren't being fed. He couldn't tell if they were the old or the new strain. If it was one of the new ones, then that was a huge mistake. Once they fed enough, the Infector bombs would erupt from the inside and negate their purpose in the cell, and the result would be a bunch of Infectors. That scenario would be totally out of control. But Frox and his gunners probably already knew that, so the Molters were all probably the original strain.

For Molters, being in a cell or being unable to hunt down prey because a territory was without it were probably the same; they couldn't feed, so they simply waited with little movement until something came along they could sink their teeth into. Jonah hoped he wasn't about to be food for any of them, but the direction the truck was headed chilled his blood, and for the first time in a long time, he was actually afraid. If he didn't act soon, everything he'd done, all his efforts, really would have been for nothing.

In a way he understood why they perpetuated the Draw; a caged man attracted Molters, and a caged Molter attracted others of its kind—naturally drawn to one another—but then armed men killed them as they funneled together from a distance. Their system might also attract Behemoths since a well-fed Molter could turn into a cocoon for them to drink, but no one had mentioned that.

Maybe Frox was right, that the Draw did work, that it did save lives, but honestly, Jonah didn't care. Jonah's people were all that mattered to him, and he would do whatever he had to do to return to them to keep them safe. That included killing anyone or anything that got in his way. Jonah just wished his

captors would somehow understand his skill set without him having to explain—it wasn't as if they would believe anything he said or care anymore anyway—and hadn't already dismissed him as Molter food.

The truck slowed to a stop and then jostled as Perry hopped out of the truck bed. He aimed his German revolver at Jonah. "Come on." As Jonah scooted himself forward, Perry pointed the barrel at an empty cell with a welcoming open door. "There."

Jonah hadn't seen the empty one. He'd only seen the ones with Molters inside them, but he felt himself relax. At least he wasn't going to be killed immediately. "We actually going through with this?"

"It's just a holding cell until we decide how to use you best."

Jonah searched for Frox, but he was already marching toward the firing line, giving orders to those who surrounded him. "Look," Jonah said to Perry, "I'm still willing to negotiate—"

"No more negotiating. No more deals. Your contribution to the Draw is appreciated. Get inside."

"I'm not going to run again, man. You can trust me. I understand my fate."

Perry yanked a handkerchief from his pocket and dabbed the cut on his ear. "Would you trust you?" He cocked the hammer of the revolver dangling at his side. "Get in."

Jonah went inside the cell, and Perry closed the door behind him. Then Perry uncocked the hammer and shoved the weapon in its holster. He produced a few zip ties and secured the door himself. "Don't get any ideas. You'll have guns on you the whole time."

Jonah inspected his new residence. It looked as if there had been another person in there before him. The ground was concave as if someone had slept there. Probably died there too.

Someone like Jonah, with everything he had to live for, plus all his combat experience and proficiency in handling weapons, work ethic, willingness to live, to survive . . . and to die like this?

"Perry," Jonah said, causing Perry to turn from resuming his business with his fellow men. "Where's the ship?"

Perry's large eyebrows knit together. "Seriously, man?"

"When all of you are dead and I'm still alive, I want a way to escape this country."

Perry laughed, and it sounded a bit forced, and then he shook his head. "You never give up."

"Let me fight! I'll even challenge you to make that happen. You and me, one on one. If you win—"

"I would."

"Then you can return me to this prison. *But* . . . if I beat your ass, you give me a gun with plenty of ammo and let me give it a go. Let me kill them until I die or until morning."

Perry squinted at him, and it seemed as if he were actually contemplating

the challenge.

"What makes more sense?" Jonah said. "Leaving me in here to molt or rot or allowing me to help you kill as many of them as possible?"

"Already told you, man. You're part of the Draw."

"I know you'll need to discuss it with Frox," Jonah said, "but I imagine the Draw is for those who . . . who can't do what I can do."

"And what would that be?"

"Turn me loose and see. You won't be disappointed."

A large grin spread beneath the salt-and-pepper beard. "I would enjoy throwing hands with you, regardless of who won. I really would."

"I'm not going to shut up until you man up."

Perry slowly reapproached the cell. "Except I know you're lying, and you'll just try to escape again. Probably kill some of our people, more than you have already, or even me. You'll say anything to get out of there. But I understand. I would do the same."

"Faced with life or death, I choose—"

"You don't have any more choices, and I take orders. *I* still have choices, and I've chosen to take orders. The way we do things keeps the rest of us safe. I believe you, what you say, that you're a fighter, but regardless of your abilities, and I know it's fucked up, but the new guy is always the weakest link."

"That's probably why you're up against it now."

It was dark when a cluster of men forced someone to walk against their will toward the cell Jonah was in. The stranger was wearing a straitjacket. Except the man was thrashing and snarling, and as the group drew closer, Jonah realized it wasn't a man at all. It was being held upright and not allowed to hunch as they naturally did.

They must have known the man was going to molt, so they'd put a straitjacket on him. It would be pretty obvious, especially if someone had seen an Infector bite him—or if one was put on him deliberately—but another way to know such a thing was if someone didn't wake up for a few days, and their skin turned blue. Jonah couldn't imagine it being easy to trap a Molter—they were so wild—or it being still long enough to put a straitjacket on it. Whether the molt was planned or an accident didn't matter. They were using it for the Draw.

After all this, after all I've been through, my life is going to end as a sacrifice?

The biggest problem was Jonah had no weapons on him, nor did he have any leverage with anybody to get his hands on one. Especially now. His negotiating skills had been exhausted. They'd expired. Not even offering to fistfight Perry had worked—Jonah had honestly believed it would—and he

thought he had that Neanderthal figured out. Jonah's fate had been decided, but by others, so there was only one thing he could do and that was to change that fate to be in his favor.

They cut the zip ties holding the door shut, opened the cell door, and threw it in as quickly as possible. One man tugged new ones tight so quickly it was as if he were in a competition. That was because he feared what was in the vicinity, as they all should. Then they all turned away, obviously having seen what was about to happen before. It was a relief that they didn't enjoy watching someone get drained and die. Except they'd left the straitjacket on the creature. They had been afraid to take it off and for good reason. Molters were vicious and also incredibly strong.

Leaving the straightjacket on was a mistake on their part, and that was the only benefit of them not understanding Jonah's skill set. Even though his bragging was heard, Jonah had still been dismissed as if he were like anybody else. As if he would just accept what they had planned and allow the Molter to sink its teeth into him, and he would die without protest.

But none of them really knew Jonah, had no idea who he truly was, didn't know how much training he had or all the Molters and Behemoths and even fellow humans he had faced and defeated in battle. They hadn't witnessed what he'd accomplished or been a part of any of it. And it was impossible for them to understand how much he had to lose and what his people meant to him.

When the predator gnashed its jaws, lurching forward with a predatory confidence, Jonah tackled it to the ground, twisting it as they both fell. As it struggled to right itself, Jonah grabbed its head from behind as tightly as possible while avoiding its teeth, ignoring its thrashing and snarling, and with all his strength, he twisted sharply. The Molter squealed just as its neck *popped* and then *crunched*. Then it went limp, and Jonah shoved it to the ground angrily.

Jonah breathed heavily from within the cell, glaring at the group of men marching away from him as if he were already dead. "Told you!" he yelled.

The men, who had only just delivered the creature meant as Jonah's intended death, turned and then stared in disbelief.

"You didn't take the damn jacket off?" Perry bellowed to the nearest man from a distance. Seemed Perry hadn't wanted to watch Jonah die either.

"And get bit?" he said. "I've seen how fast—"

"What the hell did you think would happen?"

"I'm a Molter killer," Jonah said. "Turn me loose."

Perry's incredulous expression and agape mouth closed when he marched back to the cell and said to Jonah, "You think that changes anything? We'll just put another one in there with you." Perry turned to glare at his men. "Without a fucking straitjacket on."

"That sounds like way more trouble than its worth. You just happen to have more Molters on standby?"

"We do."

"That's *so* fucked up. I'm just one man, but I can kill more of them than all your men combined."

"So you say."

"If you let me out of here, I promise I will stay and fight tonight."

"Yeah, right."

"I won't harm any of you, and I won't run off. I promise. And that's only because I understand how things are . . . I want to live." This time Jonah was telling the total truth. "But once I see daylight again, I'm leaving. I'll just disappear. But if I somehow escape on my own, I'll do everything you're afraid I will."

"I'm afraid of Molters. Not you."

Jonah ignored that. "I'm offering you a truce that lasts until the sun rises. During that time, I'm on your side because it's against *them*. Do the right thing, not just for me, but for yourselves because, believe me, you want my help."

Perry's expression wasn't as stoic as it had been. Maybe it was the idea of getting another Molter and going through the arduous task of putting it in the cell again. Straitjacket or not, it wouldn't be easy. "It ain't up to me."

Jonah groaned. "Get Frox over here."

"He's busy."

"Get him over here, Perry." When Perry turned away, Jonah spat at his direction, but it didn't even come close. It was the intent behind it. "Fucking coward."

Perry's head dipped somewhat, hardly noticeable, probably not to anyone but Jonah, but Jonah had seen it. Jonah didn't actually believe Perry was a coward; he was only trying to get him to react so he could get out of the cell. All his efforts had amounted to nothing so far, so he had no choice but to make a new offer. But even that hadn't worked. Maybe Perry just needed some time.

Jonah calmed himself and turned in the other direction, gazing out to where the enemy was expected, taking deep breaths, and considered briefly if he and Perry would have been friends if the world were normal. *Nah. He's a prick.*

With almost every man and woman aiming their weapons toward the dark growing toward them, what looked like the edge of the world, Jonah knew what to expect, just as they did; the enemies were going to be here soon. Jonah wasn't going to be set free. Whenever that door opened next, a Molter would be forced inside again and apparently without restraints. There was nothing else he could do . . .

Only so much he *could* do, so for now, he sat in the dirt, leaned his head against the metal mesh, and closed his eyes. Behind those eyes, there was a whole heck of a lot of plotting within a mind plagued with being in mission mode.

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CHAPTER 14

"Just like clockwork," someone said.

The woman next to him said, "You said that yesterday."

A few down the row shouted, "And three months ago!"

Laughter rifled down the line, all in on the same joke. The enemies were beginning to reveal themselves but with reluctance; they didn't like to be unhidden, and it was then that Jonah saw how Frox's men used the armament at night. There were lanterns and other light sources he couldn't quite identify—probably flashlights balanced upright—but the trail of bright seemed to stretch for miles. They were obviously not concerned about calling attention to themselves. The Molters were incoming and couldn't be prevented.

Seemed Jonah would be used as bait for the masses. From where the cell was positioned, he could see the hills, the dark still showing a slim gash of horizontal visibility. It was generous of the night, almost like a preview, as if it were a delayed promise of what was to come if they could all just survive until morning.

There was a large mass of them, hunched, moving jerkily, like ants, constantly moving, but that was only from the casual observer who didn't know how coordinated their movement could be. It wasn't random; they were hunting and scouring every inch of ground for potential prey. The enemy hadn't just happened upon those hills. They'd gone there deliberately, and it was likely some of them had survived previous battles. At least there wasn't a forest for them to hide in to stalk.

Then even more of them appeared as if they'd been on the move for years and had finally arrived. The only reason Jonah knew that wasn't the case was because of the reaction of the combatants. They were calm. It was expectation, and it was shocking to Jonah to know that they fought on this battlefield like this every night.

Jonah realized his mortality, the insignificance of his own individual life, and during the here and the now, he also realized he was nothing special, regardless of his skills and training, just as he had been treated during the war before the Molting. Had he died then, it would be as if he were to die now, a tiny microscopic blip during the history of the planet.

People had died on this particular battlefield so many times that they'd all probably grown used to it. Difficult to avoid emotional coldness when dealing with death all the time. It was why Jonah was treated as if he were already deceased, but also why Frox and Perry had attempted to help him understand his contribution to the Draw, part of the foundation that kept the rest of them alive. Another big part was the firing line.

"No," Jonah said, quietly.

His disillusionment was fleeting because the battle had begun. Seeing so

many of the enemy was extremely humbling. For a few seconds, he completely forgot about himself, Doreen and Heike, and his woes. But everything he fought for came roaring back as quickly as the short time he'd been awestruck by what was before him. His life wasn't insignificant. It meant something because he meant something to others.

There's just so damn many of them.

The men and women who were prepared to fight carried small arms—pistols, shotguns, and rifles, semi or fully automatic. That didn't make Jonah very hopeful for the night's outcome because it meant close-quarters fighting was expected. How many civilians actually possessed that skill? But also, could even trained soldiers kill Molters that way? It wasn't as if Molters were born wearing straitjackets.

Before the fighting got uncomfortably close, many had makeshift supports for the more powerful weapons to keep enemies away: .50-caliber machine guns, but mostly Russian assault rifles and regular automatic rifles. Some carried grenade launchers, German and American weaponry, and there were placements for fully automatic grenade launchers like the one Jonah had used at Henrytown. His was presently stored under the cabin in the cellar.

There were quite a few howitzers, but mostly there were mortars. The mortars looked to be from modern day, but there were also the kind used during World War II. There had to be ex-military among those who manned the firing line, just as Jonah was; he was sure of it. Anyone who could handle those kinds of weapon systems needed training unless the knowledge was passed down before death, which was possible but not likely.

Jonah was unsure how to operate a howitzer or mortar. He was never trained to operate either weapon. He never saw them fire during the war either; none of his missions involved them, but he had seen a demonstration of a howitzer firing during basic training. He hadn't seen one fire since, though, so he supposed his unfamiliarity with their explosions had woken him during the night over the years because they had been used during the battles on the firing line. He must have mistaken their blasts for thunder and lightning.

That only confirmed how far away the cabin was as most of their impacts were only echoes and vibrations. It was a little embarrassing for him to mistake artillery for weather. For some reason, he thought he should know every aspect of every weapon system, but just like any training or knowledge, if you don't use it you lose it.

When he was in a war theater, Jonah never had to look up to know which kind of helicopter was flying overhead. After he got kicked out of the military, he slowly found himself having to look to the sky on occasion. But he was sure the catastrophic howitzer and mortar weapon systems weren't ever fired as much as they would be tonight. If so, he would have been able to eventually identify them as artillery.

What was once a slow emergence changed into dramatically high numbers of the creatures, which seemed to increase as each second passed, spreading

like a flood that not even nature could control. The ready combatants reacted accordingly. What at first was stoic expectation and a few jokes quickly transformed into a panicked urgency.

Without warning, explosions and gunfire ramped up into a ferocious battle, prompting the creatures to scramble forward on the attack, forgoing an attempt not to get spotted. Someone, likely Frox—Jonah had seen him with a radio in his hand earlier—had given the order to fire.

Not being involved in the battle felt terrible to Jonah. To know what he was capable of and how those around him had no idea showed how primitively they were all thinking. Though it was not said, it was obvious; everyone was fighting for their own tomorrow, and most of them were clearly only concerned with their own lives. Those doing the fighting were probably delaying the actions of some who no doubt wanted to flee, but only temporarily.

If there were any hint of the offensive crumbling, some who wanted to run would likely turn into many, and the others would also likely scatter, which could cause all their strength to break down completely. Something told Jonah that tonight's battle was different from any of the others that had preceded it. Even the people who held powerful weapons looked on edge.

"I can fight!" Jonah yelled.

No one listened, though. Not that anyone who was nearby could even hear him very well. There was too much gunfire and far too many explosions. Plus, anyone who didn't keep their eyes on those hills was a fool. Those who were aware of Jonah, or even had him in sight, probably chose to ignore him anyway. Until any Molters got near him. He had been chosen to contribute to the Draw, after all.

If Jonah were part of a community, and it was decided that a stranger should be put in jail, he would probably ignore him too. What would be the point of listening to somebody once it had been decided they were to be incarcerated? Responding to ravings from a caged man was pointless and the ravings likely endless. Most of them probably thought Jonah was insane or a coward and likely had no idea why he had been chosen for the Draw. Not that it even mattered to them.

Except Jonah remembered it was important to regard everyone on the field as his enemy for his own survival. It was the worst situation he could think of, being imprisoned—he couldn't get over it—being away from his loved ones, wondering how they were doing, worrying about what would happen to them. But it was decidedly more frustrating because he wasn't even able to participate in the battle that was happening directly in front of him, something that had never happened to him before.

To not have a choice took away his dignity. It made him realize that a warrior who was unable to choose to fight was no warrior at all. That might not be entirely true, but that's what it felt like. That part of him, Jonah's true identity, was figuratively in neutral. All he could do was rev his engine by

shouting, and so far, that was an exercise in futility. Jonah had been part of the war machine in its many iterations during his life, but he wasn't now, and it was awful.

Worse still, he'd allowed a bad thing to happen. A very bad thing. A very bad thing that belonged in the category of the worst kind of bad things, the kind he had assured Doreen would never happen again. Even though he'd practically promised her, he'd still fucked up again.

Why? What compels me to make these decisions that endanger my loved ones and force me down a road where I end up alone?

Closing his eyes allowed the momentum of tears building up for years to finally pour down his cheeks. The wetness was cooled immediately by a steady wind, and he felt it signifying his failure as a man. Him giving up.

Jonah's eyes popped open. "Fuck that!" he shouted at his momentary depression, a brief dip into one of his few weaknesses. "This isn't over!"

This is just a speed bump. I'm not in neutral. I'm on standby and ready to act whenever possible. Life is full of peaks and valleys and places in between. I'm going to find a way out of this. And my mistakes will benefit us. Somehow. I know it.

In the meantime, to remain positive, searching out anything that was an uptick toward the better part of him, even while Jonah's inner self had a continuous wrestling match between the weak and the strong, both relentlessly attempting to choke the other out, he couldn't help but be impressed by the ingenuity at work.

From Jonah's perspective, a fresh one to him, to witness the absolute devastation of modern artillery—but also weapons from the past—to be a spectator of war, was absolutely jaw dropping. It made him want to be involved even more.

"Give me a mission!" Jonah yelled.

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CHAPTER 15

Doreen knew neither of them had realized what the thumping sounds had been over the last few years because they had been so sporadic. Now they were more consistent than they had ever been. The tremendous booming sounds that had woken Jonah and herself on numerous nights hadn't always been storms; they had been artillery fire, obvious now that they were so consistent. There was a battle going on somewhere. Miles away but still close enough for her to hear it well enough to know what was happening. She hoped Jonah could hear it, too, which would mean he was still alive.

Tonight was distinct from any other night since she and Jonah had been together. Doreen couldn't just assume her typical roles: a mother to Heike and a woman to Jonah. It was similar to when she was in the military; she needed to be a soldier again and would have to be tougher than usual. Not just for herself, but for Heike too.

Similar also to when she thought she would never see her father again as a little girl or when her husband had died in the accident, she would have to be the soldier she was trained to be and the one required for whatever might occur next. There was a lot of uncertainty on the horizon since the Molting began and in the immediate future, and more danger would likely show itself before the sun rose.

"Mom?" Heike's voice was muffled from inside her room with the door shut. "Do you hear that?"

"I do." The noises coming from somewhere far in the distance sounded like large drums that shook the earth every time they were pounded. Right now, someone was beating on them furiously. "Do you want to sleep in my bed?"

"*Ja.*"

"OK."

"Danke."

"Bitte."

The door opened slowly, and Heike appeared in her pajamas, looking much younger than she actually was, younger than she typically did. Children had roles just as parents did, and every so often, for comfort, they embraced being young. It showed on their faces, in their movements, and in their behavior. Heike was closer to nine years old than eight, but right now, she seemed as if she were only about five.

Heike stared for a second, noticing her mom wasn't in bed as she'd expected her to be and was instead sitting in a chair next to the window. Once Doreen encouraged her with friendly waves, Heike rubbed her eyelids and was already under the covers, having gone through the same routine on many other nights before but under circumstances that weren't as potentially risky.

Something had definitely gone wrong for Jonah during his mission. He had sent them the signal by radio.

Glancing at her rifle leaned against the wall next to the door and hoping she wouldn't have to use it before Jonah returned, there was part of Doreen that wished there was a silencer attached to the end of the barrel. Not that she was familiar with silencers. It was just that it was the most appropriate and nearest weapon, and she expected to have to use it soon, but the sound of the rifle could draw in more of whatever she was shooting at. And a report as loud as the one from a rifle wouldn't only attract the attention of desperate men. That's what she was most afraid of.

Doreen turned her gaze from the weapon to the window once again. Aside from an ever-present threat of potentially skulking Molters, there had been strange people around recently and with bad intentions. They had been dealt with, and she would do the same thing again if it came to that, but living that way was far from ideal and from who they were as people. There must be a safer place, she thought. Doreen had traveled all over Europe throughout her life, but because all communications were down—hopefully only for a while longer—she had no idea where a safer place might possibly be.

Even though she had confidence in Jonah's ability to figure something out, she doubted he would know where to go next right away. Since their arrival at the cabin, they had been essentially hiding. She didn't want their next path to be risky, to spend all their time and energy on a move only for the next place to somehow be more dangerous. For some reason, and not just because of her discussions with Jonah, the kind that were worst-case scenario, she thought she was going to have to make a major decision about that soon, except without Jonah's guidance.

It was a terrible feeling, one she never thought would actually come to fruition, but if Jonah didn't return, she would indeed have to do what she had always dreaded: move on but without him. As of right now, she wasn't sure what she would do; however, she did feel that when there was uncertainty, it was often best to do nothing.

So that's what she was doing presently and why she treated the night almost as if it were like any other, for Heike. Except she had only slept a few hours and planned on staying awake—Heike had already fallen asleep—and would stay vigilant, as was typically Jonah's role. If it came down to trouble, she had quite the arsenal to choose from, especially in the cellar. Jonah had seen to that. His vigilance wasn't an end-of-the-world hoarder's paranoia either. Jonah had actually thought the cabin might be under attack one day, so he ensured they would be ready. For anything.

Still, she suspected having all those guns brought out the warrior in Jonah, too, the part of him who wasn't the man she knew well, but the well-hidden fragment that made it possible for him to do what had to be done sometimes, to kill anything or anyone without hesitation. If Jonah could return to them, if it were in his power, she knew he would. Nothing could prevent him from

rejoining them unless . . .

No, she thought. Not possible. Not her Jonah. He was meant to live, to remain her man, continue to be her soon-to-be husband, to be Heike's stepfather, and also a father to the children they would one day have together. But Doreen also knew Jonah was *meant* to be a weapon against the Molters, one of those people you hear about doing incredible things during a war and are glad that they were alive during the time that they lived for the side they were fighting on. Doreen had no doubt Jonah was currently fighting in one way or another. When she stood, she woke Heike.

"What's the matter?" Heike said.

"Nothing," Doreen said.

"Where are you going?"

In the most reassuring tone Doreen could muster, she said, "Everything's fine."

"Don't leave me alone."

"This is nothing new, Heike. I occasionally go out during nighttime just to make sure everything's all right and safe."

"Not usually. Only recently."

"I know, but . . . I don't want anything to happen."

"And I don't want anything to happen to you."

"Nothing will. I won't be long."

"But it's night."

"I'll be armed."

"But Jonah isn't here—"

"I was a soldier too. Remember?"

"Not really."

"Well, you remember me telling you about it, right?"

"Some things."

"OK. I'm just going to go out for a few minutes to make sure everything is safe, and then I'll return."

"What if it isn't safe?"

"Then I'll shoot until it is. Stay in bed."

Doreen took the rifle, eyed the rocket launcher Jonah kept near the coat rack as she rounded the corner, and carefully opened the door. She stepped out onto the porch to look out at the night and pulled the door shut behind her, making sure there were no threats about.

Squinting, she directed herself at where the sounds were coming from. She couldn't see anything. She could only hear thumps and could barely feel the explosions reverberate through the ground. For some reason, she had been more sensitive to the noises while in bed. Maybe that was because she was lying down and closer to the ground?

There were other booming sounds in the distance too. Duller, quieter, no doubt smaller weapon systems than the ones she could hear well. Not well enough to imagine what they were. The heavy artillery hadn't been fired

during previous nights, not continuously used, but they definitely were being fired tonight.

When Doreen brought the scope of the rifle up, she noticed very dim flashes very far in the distance, behind the mountains to the northeast. If she were to guess, the battle was within fifty klicks, give or take. She realized that no matter what was going on out there, it was out of her control.

It made her feel helpless, but she couldn't do anything about it, so it was best to do nothing at all except keep weapons nearby and ready to use and take care of Heike and herself as normally as possible. The best way to do that was to do her best to get some sleep for she could not foresee the dangers of tomorrow, but she wouldn't sleep long because she needed to be ready for them, whatever they may be.

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CHAPTER 16

There were more cells down the firing line. They all looked portable, like the type used to transport prisoners in the olden days before the Molting. The movement of the occupants within gave away whether they were still human. Both an incapacitated person and a Molter attracted endless creatures. Gunmen, some of them snipers from atop the towers—and mostly out of Jonah's view—killed as quickly as they could pull triggers. Although the Draw had worked in its own barbaric sort of way, it seemed Jonah was witnessing its end.

Unpredictable flashes peppered the darkness in the distance right before blasts were audible. Mines had obviously been set. Based on all the enemies, Jonah would bet they'd been buried recently. At first the flash-blasts were sporadic, but then the mines exploded in the distance like a mile-long string of firecrackers.

The artillery impacts, however, were so close to the proximity of the firing line that not only could the explosions be heard, but their impacts could also be felt through the ground. Though danger close, the devastating munitions fired by the howitzers were keeping most of the creatures away long enough so that the battle could continue without declaring a clear victor. There was still some time on this planet for human beings to fight back.

The steady small weapons fire was mini-detonations, like tiny condensed lightning strikes dispersing erratically, and each round fired downrange echoed, making the firing line a continuous belch of war. There was something about a weapon being fired at night that made it seem more powerful, regardless of the caliber. One reason was because they were all shooting in the same direction.

Jonah's position allowed such a point of view. He could see fire exploding out of the barrels like a lightning-quick punch but only for a fraction of a second. The automatic rifles were particularly impressive, as their tongues of flame licked out unbroken until the firer released the trigger to reload or allowed the barrel to cool. It wasn't as if Jonah were safely behind the firing line; he was beyond it, on display, as bait. Thankfully there were some shooters with skill pulling triggers. Any creature that got remotely near him was put down.

The enemies were a relentless undulating mass that almost looked human upon first glance, but their hunched posture, desperate movements, and frighteningly quick rush gave hint of the predators they actually were. What was especially scary was that the Molters moved together, as if they were one mind, like a mob, except this one had claws and teeth and a mind that was practically alien and driven only to drain prey of blood. Or simply kill. People were a food source for Molters, a possible vessel for them to make more of

their kind, but also were their enemy. None of that bode well for the human race.

With the powerful weapon systems being fired so surgically, Jonah was now positive some of the men and women responsible were prior service, but from which country he could not know. Any of them would at least hear Jonah out for a few minutes if they understood his background. If they spoke English. Jonah bet if he were somehow able to walk the firing line and talk to everyone, he would meet people from all over the world. It was an example of individuals banding together for the sake of their own species.

Except maybe that consideration was only something that would have happened before the Molting. Almost everyone on the planet had no choice but to evolve as fast as the Molters had. Nothing was the same now. It would be wise for Jonah to bury his faith in humanity somewhere deep inside himself and save it for those he was sure about. There were only two people on the entire planet he could trust and also knew were still alive: Doreen and Heike.

Except judgment was something he needed to implement in the future. That was a choice for when he was remotely in a position of power, when there was meaning to his own life, and a frame of mind in which he gave up and settled in wasn't going to help him at the moment. He had to fight however he possibly could to get back to his people.

"Hey!" Jonah yelled at the top of his lungs to no one in particular, impossibly doing his best to do so over the war happening all around him. "I can handle any weapon!"

It was probably pointless to shout and obvious why the armed men and women were preoccupied. It looked as though they were keeping as many Molters at bay as had been in his nightmares. They covered the hills completely, and there was movement by them even farther in the distance, noticeable with each explosive flash, for what looked like miles. Even though the continuance of gunfire and explosions eclipsed the desperation in his voice, Jonah wasn't about to give up.

Jonah didn't want to admit it, and also didn't want Perry to be right about what he'd said to him, about how the Draw had kept the cabin safer, but if it weren't for Frox—Archard before him—and his community and what they were doing, Jonah realized that the cabin might have been overrun a long time ago. If there was a battle even remotely close to one this epic happening, then it was a certainty.

It didn't mean Jonah and his people would have been killed. Jonah would have insisted they relocate long before being overwhelmed, but the sanctity of their life over the last few years would have required some major—and frantically decided—updates. That would have put them on the road a lot sooner and where he had no control until a destination was discovered and decided on. Then he would have gone about fortifying that place as he'd done at the cabin.

If another Molter was put inside the cell with him, he was sure it wouldn't be wearing a straitjacket, and if one got in on its own, it would easily end his life. It didn't matter if he was in a cell; those things could dig. Jonah wouldn't be able to fight back if one got in with him, not without a weapon or two. Molters were as strong as apes. Maybe even stronger. If Jonah went hand to hand with one that was active and hunting and ready to feed and within attacking range, then he was dead.

Bare fists against claws and teeth and without weapons. Jonah was as vulnerable as anybody else. Infectors could be scurrying anywhere but were so far unseen. That was why he kept an eye on anything that moved. He might not have any weapons, but he could crush an Infector under his booted heel. At least they'd allowed him to keep his clothes on.

The trenches beyond had been meant as an initial volley of fired bullets but the strategy concocted was already being wasted. Mostly because no one had set foot in them. Probably because Frox had realized how many Molters were on the move. The man-made channels were crowded with creatures, as teeming as the forever of death bringers beyond, a rushing torrent of moving predators. More and more Molters just kept appearing.

"Give me a mission!" Jonah yelled again.

No one even considered his demand. They were far too concerned with saving their compatriots or their own necks. But the gunfire that fulfilled the purpose of the Draw, that was inadvertently protecting him and others, was starting to break apart. Bullets weren't as continuous. It was as if those put in charge of carrying out their particular sector of fire were less and less concerned with Molters advancing on Jonah's cell, or they were already dead, drained by singles who had snuck up on them.

The vastness of the bloodthirsty creatures jutted closer as quickly as an out-of-control wildfire. It slowly dawned on Jonah that another dawn revealing a sunrise was something he would never see again. This was it. There was no way out. No possible way he could escape. No way he could think of, and he'd plotted endlessly.

It was as if Jonah no longer existed. He was only background now. Just someone else doing their best to stay alive as long as possible, however long that might be. Breathing, but only for the moment. Because he was inside a cell, Jonah meant nothing.

But not to Doreen and Heike, the only two people he cared about on this entire planet. "Let me fight!"

And he would, even if it meant he had to end up back in here. Anything but just waiting to die without being able to partake in the battle before him.

They were almost on him. This wasn't how his life was supposed to end, but Jonah was going to die on this field in this cell in the worst way he could imagine, and no one in the vicinity gave a damn. Doreen would have no idea what happened to him, and in the deepest part of his mind, he feared the same would happen to them while they waited for him to return. They would die,

too, and no one would know except the man or men or creatures who took their lives.

As death approached, one thought that soothed him was that at least he had been able to take out hundreds of the enemy, maybe even thousands, but unfortunately his death would be by one of the very creatures he had killed so many of.

Though he would never get the M-K tattoo on his skin, his inner self—who he'd sent out on so many missions that he wouldn't be able to recall all that he'd done accurately enough to count—was sleeved with it. Just at the moment he understood his fate—not only understood but had accepted it—something peculiar happened.

Jonah heard a familiar sound, almost as if what was before him transformed into some ancient battlefield, and the leader was spurring his men to fight while riding on horseback. Although it was similar to the most primitive battles that had ever taken place—man against beast—the leader's chariot was not a horse but a vehicle. And what was particularly interesting was that the weapon attached at the gunner's hatch wasn't firing at the onslaught of creatures. It was shooting in the opposite direction of all the others, directly at the gunmen on the firing line.

Frox's armed men and women were in an uproar—for good reason—and then Jonah glimpsed the silhouette of Frox himself pointing and shouting with the unmistakable large frame of Perry alongside him. Frox, Perry, and others quickly filled a cab and truck bed, and that truck raced across the terrain toward the newcomer.

From the attacking—and surely traitorous—vehicle, someone jumped out of one of the four doors and went for one of the cells. He hurriedly set loose a tall man inside. The tall man and his accomplice both climbed into awaiting open doors and then sped off again.

Well, that's promising, Jonah thought.

Whoever was driving the rebel, speeding, up-armored UV was flooring it on their own or being ordered to do so. Its make was very familiar, being the very kind that Jonah had driven during the war and what he drove to initially escape from Oberstein years later.

As the familiar vehicle sped closer, Jonah noticed that the tall man—the one freed from the cell in the distance—climbed up and replaced whoever had been standing in the gunner's hatch. He aimed a squad automatic rifle, an SAR, the devastating weapon system Jonah had learned to use while in the military and had used to kill the Behemoth at Oberstein. He held the weapon with menace.

As the vehicle quickly made a stop near Jonah's cell—for a second, he thought it was going to ram it—he hopped to the side. Peering up at the man in the gunner's hatch, Jonah thought he looked like someone who'd been in a fistfight but lost.

Then Jonah realized he knew him. "Henry!"

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CHAPTER 17

Behind them, the report of sporadic gunfire was occasionally eclipsed by artillery launching from howitzers and mortar bombs exploding in the distance. Seemed most of it was now being used to protect beyond Frox's whereabouts, which in turn protected the group of men involved in the pending gunfight. The onslaught from the firing line deterred Molters from heading toward them, like damming a river. The creatures may not have been as smart as whoever they were made from, but they were smart enough to evade fiery explosions.

Hopefully this will only be an argument, Jonah thought.

Reducing the creatures to blood and gory bits, the munitions also lit up the night with each explosion, giving brief glimpses of the thousands that spilled toward them like an ocean filled with claws and teeth instead of water. Wave after endless wave of them stretched as far as the land itself as if every person left on earth had molted, become one of those bloodthirsty creatures, and was advancing.

Even with everything that was going on around him—the armed men and the mass of creatures that would soon be at his back—Henry had looked as if he was going to be ill when he realized it was Jonah in the cell.

When the pickup truck stopped, and Frox, Perry, and others got out armed, Henry turned his attention toward them. "This is over!" he thundered, the anger in his voice nearly eclipsing the nearby booms.

Frox's underlings aimed their guns at Henry, who pointed an angry finger at the cell where Jonah was. The silence between the opposing sides was interrupted by the weapons at the firing line and the steady roar of snarls and howls from the army of creatures. Jonah had so many questions for Henry. He was so relieved to see him. Henry was still alive even when Jonah's gut had told him differently.

There was no time to celebrate the reunion. They were all still in danger, and it was very obvious Henry didn't side with Frox for he had been a prisoner too. They still needed to get away from all those who instituted the Draw to stay alive, and there were also the charging Molters that would soon be all over them.

"You got out," Frox said.

"As if I had a choice," Henry said.

"You could have chosen not to commit murder."

"Defending yourself isn't murder."

Henry must have been the one they referred to as "another prisoner" while Jonah was in the tent at Fort Perry, after Archard had been killed. Perry glanced at Jonah, and Jonah gave him a look that showed him what he would do to him with his fists whenever he got out of the cell. If he got out of the

cell.

"How'd you get the best of Archard?" Frox said, glancing nervously at the men in the up-armored UV with Henry who all aimed weapons out the windows.

"Doesn't matter now; he's dead," Henry said. Then he pointed at Jonah. "We're going to let *him* out."

"And if we stop you?" Frox said.

Henry's finger pointed away from Jonah and toward the horde. "Look at what's going on out there. It doesn't matter how you draw them in. Not anymore. They're coming. Nothing will stop them."

"We're all bait now," Jonah said.

Even though Henry and those who broke him out had shot at the firing line, the men and women who made up the firing line had resumed shooting their weapons at the creatures through their sectors of fire undeterred. Deaths of compatriots as a result of a brief rebellion would not prevent them from keeping teeth and claws at bay. Those firers were the only reason the dispute could continue. They definitely had faith Frox would resolve things.

Frox ignored what Jonah had said, how they were all bait, even though he probably knew it was true. "Is that why you came back?" he said to Henry.

"Wanted to do what was right before we abandon this death trap," Henry said.

Henry and the others in the UV had obviously done their best to free the other people in the cells who were still alive and normal, which they also meant to do for Jonah, even before they knew who he was or who he was to Henry. Jonah wondered how many others they'd freed. But, also, who had been in those other cells?

"We got our system, and it's kept us alive," Frox said.

"We had a system at Henrytown, but eventually it failed. These things adapt and change. And I'd bet they're already getting wise to the Draw."

Frox thumbed toward the depth of endless creatures, their monstrous frontline falling dead from machine gun fire, smaller munitions from weapons of smaller caliber, and explosive shelling from mortars and howitzers. "We'll stick with what works."

"It won't last. You want to die?"

"I don't care what a traitor thinks. You killed one of your own."

"I was never a part of this nonsense. I was taken prisoner, remember?"

"That was only going to be for a short while. With your leadership skills? Archard kept you in the dark. Did the same to me when I was first abducted."

Perry's big head swung toward Frox. He obviously hadn't known that.

"The next step would have been inclusion if you hadn't fucked it all up," Frox said. "You would have become one of us."

Henry's hard expression hardened even more. "I would die before that happened."

Frox considered him. "There's a reason my men haven't opened up on

you."

From the gunner's hatch, Henry leveled the SAR directly at him. "That right?"

"It is."

"And why's that?"

"We need everybody whether we like them or not. Join our ranks, and your mutiny will be pardoned."

"Just like that, huh?"

"Just like that. Because of you, I'm in charge now. What I say goes, and if I command everyone not to lay a hand on you, they will obey me. Like I said, there's a reason we haven't opened up on you. I am that reason."

The ceaseless growling and snarling and howling of the deeper ranks of Molters was getting much louder and also closer than anyone would have liked. For now, there were others holding their attention, either with weapons or because they hungered for the blood running through their veins, and they were an easier kill than the band deciding the future of the Draw.

There were obviously snipers very aware of Frox's location. Every time a lone Molter attempted to sneak up, it was dropped with a headshot or a bullet to the body. Those still alive and loyal to Frox kept him safe, inadvertently protecting everyone around him, still indoctrinated no matter the proof of the Draw's looming failure before them. That kept most Molters disinterested, and instead they ran for the opposite side of the field.

Except the rest of the creatures would swarm over the area within minutes no matter how many shells exploded or how accurate of marksmen any of those snipers were. The fact that the confrontation was taking place at all, especially beyond the firing line and not behind it, was extremely dangerous. Then again everyone still alive—but especially on this battlefield—was used to living among the enemy, similar to living near shark-infested waters when every now and then a swim was the most direct route to where you needed to go.

"We all need to abandon this place, Frox," Henry said. "It's about to be overrun. There's too many of them."

"We hold them back here. There's nowhere else to go. Anybody goes anywhere else, they die, because it's all them now. Why can't you understand that?" Frox said. "We need everybody, and that includes you and all those traitors in that vehicle with you. All we have to do is survive until the sun comes up."

"You don't decide that. We're not under your leadership or anyone else's. Archard is dead. And too many other leaders are too. The Draw must end."

Frox shook his head. "If we change things now, all those who gave their lives, their contributions will have been for nothing."

Henry also shook his head. "We're leaving."

The radio squawked inside the UV. The vehicle had obviously belonged to Archard's side. *"They're breaking through!"*

The Molters looked to still be relatively under control in the distance, but someone thought otherwise at the firing line to communicate something like that. Gunfire continued to drop many Molters scampering downrange; the only goal of each was to get close enough to get someone down on the ground to feed on or just kill them. The men involved in the debate had no choice but to aim their weapons at the larger threat and start shooting.

Seizing the opportunity, a man in the UV opened the door and emerged with wire cutters, someone Jonah recognized . . . but he couldn't quite place him. He put something behind the vehicle, hurried to the cell Jonah was in, clipped the zip ties off, and yanked open the mesh cage door.

That was when Jonah realized who he was. Standing before him was Salgado, the grenadier from the town Jonah didn't know the name of, the decimated one surrounded by mountains. Salgado had been one of the soldiers Jonah had helped hunt down and eliminate a Behemoth before he headed to Henrytown.

"What's up, brother?" Salgado said.

Jonah couldn't believe it. First Henry, now Salgado. He wondered if other familiar faces would show up in his future. He sure hoped so. "I thought you were dead."

"Thought the same thing for you. Come with me. A cage is no place for a Molter killer."

It was only then that Frox and his side noticed what had just happened. They'd been too focused on the Molters and for good reason: they were nearly on them. So far, their bullets had only fired into Molter flesh, but everyone in the vicinity sensed that was about to change.

Jonah gave a defiant look to Frox and Perry as he walked past them and moved near the UV with Salgado, clearly showing which side he was on.

Without taking his aim away from the approaching creatures, Frox yelled, "Kill them!"

The gunfire shot up the UV in bright sparks as the bullets glanced off the armor and the flashes of light combined with what was already going on down the firing line. Men ran for cover. Perry seemed intent on killing Jonah over anyone else, and before Jonah got safely behind the up-armored vehicle with the others, Perry fired at him with that German revolver of his, the gunshots sounding like cannon fire.

Jonah was already running before that happened. He leaped and did a shoulder roll behind the vehicle, bullets ricocheting off the bumper directly behind him. Jonah had never been so thankful that he'd gone on all those runs to stay in shape. It was as if he'd been training for that very moment.

Salgado handed Jonah an automatic rifle that was leaning against the bumper. He'd obviously placed it there before he'd ventured to the cell Jonah had been in. Prepared expectation. "Just like old times, my friend."

Jonah felt a surge of strength fill him. In order to accomplish a mission, he just needed the right tools. As far as a gunfight went, an automatic rifle was

priceless. There were still loyalists to Frox and the Draw as far down the firing line as Jonah could see. The ends of howitzer barrels continued to fire explosive clouds of light as bright as the sun.

As long as the weapons were active—their firers oblivious to or uninterested in the altercation close by—they could focus on the skirmish at hand and not the creatures. It was clear that no matter what was going on around them, the opposing sides meant to kill each other. It didn't take long before gunshots rang out from both sides, adding to the giant battle surrounding them.

No one's aim was at its best because it was hurried as the horde edged closer. All of them knew that, at any moment, the weapon used on a person might be needed for one or more of those advancing bloodthirsty creatures.

Being the type of man who refused to think of himself as a victim, especially now that he was free of the cell and armed, Jonah's life, and the lives of those he cared about, were back in his hands. Completely up to him now that he was turned loose and held a weapon.

Using vehicles as cover, opposing sides shot at each other, guns aimed in every direction it seemed. It was as if they'd all decided to be present for the end of the world, with people on one side but turning on one another and bellowing, roaring, and howling creatures quickly closing in to finish off whoever survived.

Henry had left the SAR on standby and instead used an automatic rifle. He popped up from the gunner's hatch to shoot and then duck down within the interior of the up-armor of the UV. He waited, picking his shots, and repeated the assault with two quick pulls of the trigger, sending out bursts of gunfire. Henry wasn't shooting the SAR, which likely meant he was expecting to use it later. Even if they all survived the gunfight, there was a main battle going on, and it was far from over. Jonah's side wanted to leave, and Frox's side wanted to kill them because they were a threat. They were at an impasse, and the only solution was whoever shot the final bullet.

Frox, Perry, and their side were staying behind the pickup truck out of sight because their vehicle was not armored, and Salgado and the others on Henry's side had opened the doors of the UV as the gunfight went on. They ducked all around the vehicle shadowed by night, its armor probably the only thing keeping them alive as bullets glanced off, ricocheted, and sparked. Neither side had killed anyone yet.

Frox's men fired Russian assault rifles without aiming down the sights. It was only cover fire. They were hoping to hit anything that moved, and they were probably only trying to protect Frox. It was natural for those in a firefight to think being as close to cover as possible was the best way not to get shot. That was not so. It was a mistake. It actually created a bigger target, so Jonah squatted low, took a step back from the vehicle, and leaned around the tire just enough to get a sight on one of Frox's men.

Being away from cover allowed just a slice of Jonah to be seen by the

enemy, but it was more than enough to create a sector of fire. Jonah aimed at the first of Frox's side he saw, his upper torso filling his sight picture. Jonah squeezed the trigger, sending out burst fire that hit him center mass. He fell.

That allowed Jonah to take a stunted step to his right even farther, dropping more of Frox's guards with each pull of the trigger, closer to ending the one in charge. When Frox made the mistake of ducking into view after avoiding other bullets, he was in Jonah's sights, so Jonah squeezed the trigger and held it.

After Frox crumpled to the ground, dead, Perry, who had been to Frox's right and just beyond Jonah's aim, couldn't believe it. "You son of a bitch!"

It was obvious who he was yelling at. Perry's voice boomed practically as loudly as the remaining howitzers that fired in the distance. The two men had hated each other upon their first meeting, so it wasn't a surprise when the man as big as a boulder stepped out of cover and rushed Jonah. Based on the look on Perry's face, he wanted to reduce Jonah to pieces with his fists alone.

When Jonah tried to aim the automatic rifle, Perry was already in front of him, and he grabbed the barrel and yanked it away, tossing it out of view, and then he and Jonah landed in a pile on the ground, both men punching. That wasn't working at all for Jonah, so he did his best to push the big man off him, but then Perry started connecting with his face, each blow pounding him closer to unconsciousness.

Jonah's vision was already blurry, and his ears rang. Something wet and warm ran down his lips. Definitely blood from his nose. Jonah slid his arms up to deflect the blows Perry was delivering, so Perry's massive fists chose the side of Jonah's head instead. No guns were being shot at them. The fight was allowed to go on because neither side wanted to kill their man.

"Get him, Jonah!" Henry yelled.

"Yeah," Salgado agreed. "Get that fucker!"

"You're next, Salgado!" Perry bellowed.

"We'll see!"

Motivated by Henry and Salgado in his corner, Jonah arced a quick elbow that mashed Perry's nose, causing blood to leak and his eyes to water. Capitalizing on the opportunity, Jonah grabbed him by both ears and as hard as he could, drove his head upward into Perry's nose with a solid head butt.

Perry's face was instantly painted with more red, and his hands flailed blindly, trying to get ahold of Jonah as Jonah scooted backward on his shoulder blades and out from under him. Perry caught hold of his jacket just as Jonah was about to be out of reach, and then Perry did what Jonah hoped he wouldn't do; he flopped on top of him and bear hugged him.

As Jonah was being flattened by a man who seemed to be even bigger on the ground, he gradually remembered his hand-to-hand combat training, a move meant to dissuade a homicidal enemy that would be a last-ditch effort to survive. Snaking an arm upward, Jonah found Perry's beard, then his bloody nose and cheek, and then, with all his strength, shoved a thumb into the

stubborn softness of Perry's right eye. Perry roared, and Jonah finally rolled out from under his powerful grasp.

Staying to Perry's blind side, Jonah was able to get back on his feet and took quick steps away from the man searching with his arms flailing out. If Perry were to get ahold of Jonah again, he would no doubt crush him to death. Jonah was well in view of Frox's remaining men when he spotted the weapon Perry had tossed away. Hoping they would miss when they shot at him, Jonah ran for it, grabbed it off the ground, raised the weapon, and pulled the trigger, spraying Perry with bullets.

The muzzle flashes lit up the darkness, exposing the shocked look on Perry's face, as if he couldn't believe what was happening to him, and then Henry and the others joined in on the shooting of Perry until he collapsed to the ground. The magazine of Jonah's weapon was empty, and he flinched as he expected a hundred bullets . . . but Frox's men didn't shoot him.

When Jonah looked, he saw they didn't intend to fire their weapons at him or Henry or the others because Frox and Perry—who were their leaders—were dead. Leaderless, they were individuals now.

Abruptly, mortar bombs exploded all around them, taking out hundreds of Molters that were doing their best to get to them. They could have all been killed right then and there with so many munitions fired danger close, so they were all in agreement when one of Frox's men yelled, "We need to get the hell out of here!"

Shells thumped when dropped into the mortar weapon systems, only to be launched by a predetermined trajectory in an arc to explode on their targets. They were more audible now because most of the howitzers had gone silent. The mortar bombs were flashes of light all over the hills in the distance.

Then the light from the explosions faded, and as Jonah watched, the swirling movement of Molters were coming far faster than they could be killed or fended off. The firing line and all its walls and towers and armed men and women were about to fall.

Jonah held out his hand, and Salgado instantly knew what to do; he handed him a loaded magazine. Jonah yanked the empty one out of the magazine well and put it in his cargo pocket, slapped the loaded one in, and yanked the charging handle. The men who remained didn't have to be told what to do next; they aimed their weapons at all the creatures spilling toward them from the darkness and fired.

Muzzle flashes and the report of gunfire, flashes of light and explosions, shouting and swearing dominated the human side.

Sharp teeth and claws and bulbous eyes, snarling and growling and howling dominated the side of the Molter threat.

The Molters did not all look the same, but they sounded that way. Some had lips—the original strain—and some didn't. The new strain that were green were all Infector bombs. Every one of them could howl. Everything about them, including how they communicated, was scary, alien, and overall

revolting.

A sudden storm streaked across the landscape, and a lightning bolt shot a mountain top. For a brief moment, Jonah saw the sheer number of them there actually were; so many it was worse than all his nightmares combined because it was real. He was witnessing hundreds of thousands of the creatures on the attack. They were a tsunami of cascading death intent on destroying the walls of the firing line and with that humanity's future.

Jonah shot a Molter in the head, and it fell back. It had been facing him when the other Molters were focused on the bulk of people at the firing line, and he heard the dreaded sound of a bedsheet tearing. Then he watched as the thing silently exploded, its flesh shredded in flowery and bloody seams, and Infectors erupted upward in filmy sheets of stringy mucus. It wasn't just incoming Molters they had to deal with.

Jonah squinted. The earth was crawling. "Infectors!"

The knowledge of what else was advancing caused a panic among the battle-hardened men. Weapons fired in practically every direction, and men took off running in every direction too. Three fell at the same time with Infectors all over them, then they disappeared under too many to be counted, a moving blanket of black legs. Then, impossibly, things got even worse.

"Behemoths!" Salgado yelled.

Based on what was happening on this battlefield, the human race would be finished off before dawn. The large multilegged monstrosities rushed through the crowd of Molters, trampling any of them that got in their way. Behemoths moved in a way that seemed impossible on land, similar to an octopus.

Even though one of the Behemoths was being fired on, it crashed full force into a howitzer. Then another one did the same thing, knocking over another of the most powerful weapons on the firing line. The desperate and sporadic gunfire ceased like a flame being snuffed out, leaving only darkness behind. There were even Behemoths fighting each other in the distance, which wasn't a surprise because it was in their nature, and many had seen it before, including Jonah, but it added an unsettling factor to all the chaos.

The continuous onslaught by the Behemoths and Molters and Infectors suddenly made the howitzers and mortars useless because those who fired the devastating weapons were either killed or forced to abandon their positions. Molters and Behemoths could be spotted when incoming, but a wave of Infectors was practically invisible until they weren't. Keeping them away would be like shooting at bees in the air with a revolver.

The war slowly lowered in decibels because there was only some gunfire now or the occasional thump of a mortar shell followed by an explosion in the distance. Even these steadily diminished because there weren't very many men and women who were still alive to operate the weapon systems.

Even from a distance, it was obvious why the Behemoths had attacked the firing line. It was where almost everyone was, and the Behemoths had recognized the threat of them, and they were hungry. Jonah and the others

watched in horror as Behemoths stabbed anyone who got near them with their stinger-equipped tails, held them in place with their many legs, and drank them. Screaming in pain added to snarling and growling, roars, and dwindling gunfire.

The battle was now completely out of control. There were many Behemoths in competition with far too many Molters—the very creatures that had lived only to serve them until the new strain emerged—and now every species was doing their best just to survive. With the army of Molters, Behemoths appearing and shattering the offense like battering rams, and Infectors taking down people left and right, they were facing a triple threat of creatures that would soon eradicate all humans from the planet.

Henry clearly objected to that and decided to kill all the Molters and Infectors himself, and he began firing the SAR from the gunner's hatch of the UV. He had obviously suspected something like this would happen and had saved the devastating weapon capable of firing 6mm ammunition at fourteen rounds per second for this very moment. It tore through any creature that got remotely near them.

But then Henry stopped shooting. "Holy . . . We need to get out of here right now!"

Jonah shot a gaze at what had caught Henry's attention, and he couldn't believe what he was seeing. Someone had launched star clusters, the free-falling pyro and smoke parachutes that lit up the darkness, and now it was much easier to see into the night. In a way, that was unfortunate because it was then that Jonah felt Henry's sense of panic.

Jonah had seen and killed enough Molters to spot the subtle differences between the strains. Most Behemoths fought to the death, but then others seemed to avoid confrontation, rogues driven by their own individual instincts. Jonah suspected there were multiple strains of Molters and Behemoths, but their subtle differences were practically imperceptible, and thinking of them as the same would be like thinking that all fish in the ocean were the same. It wasn't just the creatures' physicality that was changing; their behavior was, too, and it seemed to be evolving rapidly.

That was especially apparent because many of the Molters weren't interested in the humans at all. Instead, they were suddenly focused on taking down the Behemoths. Things had changed that fast. The Behemoths fought back, of course, were probably jarred by the surprise attacks, and used their defunct stingers to stab Molters in the torso or face.

There were definitely more Infector bombs among the horde, and maybe even Molters that were still capable of birthing Behemoth spores. Infectors were everywhere, and no doubt most of them had come from the green Molters as was their role in this war. Infectors were shot, kicked at, stomped, but when none of that worked, fled from. Many people panicked and ran, but most weren't upright for long.

The mini-offensive had held since taking down Frox and his men, but it

was getting smaller by the minute and wouldn't last much longer. It occurred to Jonah that the battle on the hills beyond would decide who would continue to reign on Earth. It was as if the planet was coming undone, and the differentiating factor in all of it was those who could make choices. The Molters relied on pure, brutal instinct, but people possessed an intellect. Well, now was definitely the best time to use it.

The original strain of Molters had to feed on multiple people in order to cocoon, but the green ones weren't drones driven to feed a master. Many, or maybe nearly all, of the Molters were of the new strain and independent of Behemoths, which meant it was impossible to know how many they'd killed because Jonah had no idea how many people or other animals a green Molter needed to feed on before it birthed the Infectors growing within it. Did it require a dozen feedings? A hundred? It was likely he was witnessing an army of creatures that were responsible for the slaughter of millions.

As he watched hell spew forth toward him—and it sounded like hell too—he all too briefly wondered if any of them had been decent before they'd molted. Most likely many of them had been loving and caring mothers, fathers, brothers, sisters, husbands, and wives. How many of those people had molted and come back as something else and massacred what had once been their own families?

The world was ending. That was a fact. The green Molters weren't the only ones all over a few Behemoths, feeding on them, taking them down to the ground or attempting it; the other kind were too. Without a Behemoth to serve, what purpose did Behemoths have for them? They were useless, which made them the enemy, and the enemy of animals in that way were also often food.

Jonah's hope that day in the cave when he first saw a green Molter, that they somehow weren't deadlier than the others, was for naught. The green ones were an even bigger threat than he'd first realized because they didn't serve a Behemoth; they were independent of them, and they killed until the Infectors within them matured. Whenever that was. It could be a choice or only happen during one time a year for all Jonah knew.

The original strain of Molter would no doubt still cocoon if they could survive and the Behemoth they were naturally tethered to still lived. But the green ones were feeding on the Behemoths, so soon, the new strain would likely be dominant.

What is going on? Jonah thought.

The battle was so chaotic it was as if a tornado and a tsunami were wrestling for supremacy, and then an earthquake decided to shake things up. Some Behemoths were already dead and being fed upon, but most must have realized their standing with the creatures that once lived to serve them, to feed and then become their food, and that that time was over. All of a sudden, the Behemoths were on their own.

They roared and stomped their massive, tree-size legs, competing not only

for the remaining food that all strains considered a host or a meal, but also for their own survival. But that didn't mean there weren't a lot of Molters still very interested in Jonah, Henry, Salgado, and the rest of them.

Henry climbed out of the gunner's hatch and leaped down to the ground. "Get back in the vehicles, now!"

Whoever had been in charge didn't matter. It was the command everyone, including Frox's men, wanted to hear. Henry opened both doors and got in the passenger seat of the up-armored UV, his door still open, and thumbed toward the door behind him. Jonah jumped in the back seat, slammed the door as Henry did the same, and saw Salgado step up into the gunner's hatch.

Henry introduced the men Jonah didn't know. "Jonah, this is Philip," Henry pointed at the driver and then at the man next to him whose face Jonah couldn't see because it was covered with a scarf and he wore goggles. "And Nico."

Jonah exhaled with relief. "Thanks for saving me, guys."

"Same goes for me fellas," Henry said, and both men nodded as if it were nothing.

Other UVs and trucks started up all around the firing line and revved their engines. The vehicles threw terrain and dirt behind them as drivers mashed accelerators to the floor, and they sped away in different directions. But all, beyond what remained of the firing line or behind it, drove parallel to the incoming onslaught of unstoppable creatures. Especially the Behemoths that were either intent on feeding on those fleeing, destroying the vehicles, or doing their best to escape from the rampaging Molters themselves.

In the UV, Jonah shouted up at Salgado. "Donnelly and Jacobs! They still with us?

"They are!" Salgado shouted beneath him. "Protecting the others from Henrytown!"

Others? Jonah was exhilarated that there might be anyone else who had survived, but he didn't want to start guessing about who they might be. Too many had died there.

"I'll talk to you soon!" Salgado said. "You'll definitely see some recognizable faces, my friend!"

Jonah already had. Henry turned around in the passenger seat and stuck his hand out toward him, grabbing his hand and shaking it. Then he pulled Jonah by the neck into an awkward hug between the seats, and Jonah felt the sudden strength of the kind of man he never hoped to fight. A man like Perry, and Jonah was glad that fight was behind him.

"Where are they? They safe?" Henry said.

Jonah was about to tell him when Salgado went loud with the SAR, yelling, "I'm gonna need some assistance!"

Spent 6mm round casings *clinked* all over the outside of the speeding vehicle. The rush of attacking creatures forced Henry to break his embrace of Jonah, grab his rifle off the floorboard, and aim it out the window. Jonah slid

down his window and did the same.

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CHAPTER 18

Engines shattered the peaceful silence of morning, magnified and brought forth by forest and wind down the only dirt road leading to the cabin and waking up Doreen. She had nodded off, dressed already. Hearing the vehicles, she jumped out of bed as fast as if she were still in the military and in training. Heike wasn't awake yet, and Doreen wouldn't bother making the bed after Heike got up.

"Heike."

Whoever was inside the vehicles would be there shortly. Something had obviously gone wrong. Doreen was positive of that. She could sense it. And it wasn't only because Jonah hadn't returned; it was because vehicles were speeding toward the cabin as if they knew where it was located. And she knew the sound of military vehicles all too well, being a transportation specialist. The fact that they hadn't arrived yet gave her time to prepare.

Prepare for what exactly?

Doing her best not to get carried away and fuss and worry was similar to staying in shape. It was a struggle because she was more civilian than soldier now, mother being her most important role, and she wasn't the same person she was when she'd worn a uniform. That didn't mean she couldn't access that part of her. It was always only dormant.

"Heike."

For some reason, Doreen felt to her core that they would be leaving the cabin for good and wouldn't be coming back. Except that would be on her own terms because she wasn't about to allow an abduction. It occurred to her she should have prepared for that possibility and loaded even more food, jugs filled with boiled water, belongings, supplies, and weapons in the spare truck Jonah had kept up and running so meticulously for a time like this one. There was enough of all of it to be away for days or even weeks but not for much longer, not unless she started following Jonah's map and digging. The supplies loaded in the truck had been stored in there right after Jonah found it and drove it home. It was only the basic essentials.

As far as clothing went, other than what Doreen was wearing, and after Heike got dressed, and the backpacks they would carry out and the weapons—what they would use to defend themselves and what was already in the truck—that would be all. Doreen realized she had held back from being the one who made all the decisions about those sorts of things because she wanted it to be Jonah. By not doing it, it was as if she was forcing him to stay alive for her. For them. Now she was only disappointed in herself. She hadn't been realistic, just hopeful, and sometimes hope was only a fantasy. At times, it could even be a death sentence.

"Heike! Aufwachen!"

Her daughter hadn't even stirred yet, even after Doreen had risen from her nap with alarm, and when Heike finally did open her eyes, she only twisted her head without rolling over to see what was going on and if she actually needed to rise. But upon seeing the seriousness on her mom's face, she sprang into action as if it were a drill she'd perfected.

"What's wrong?" Heike said.

"Get dressed."

"Are we in danger?"

"*Sprich nicht.* Do as I say."

Heike hurried out of the room, still wearing her favorite comfortable pajamas, and Doreen hoped she would be able to wear them tonight too. With a tank full of fuel and fuel canisters in the back of the pickup also, Doreen was prepared to drive all day and night—stopping only for a few potty breaks—and maybe even longer until she found a safe place for herself and Heike. But they still needed to deal with whomever was about to arrive. However that went, they might be able to evade them.

Doreen heard the squealing of brakes and the slide of tires in slushy dirt. They were already here! The only way that could have happened was if they knew precisely where the cabin was located. Jonah wouldn't have given up that information freely. Or easily. She hated to think what might have been done to him for him to give up that information. She couldn't fathom his doing it at all, actually. They probably killed him yet still found out about this place.

Heike had already thrown on her day clothes and must have left her pajamas on the floor. Doreen cracked the door open and could see their escape path was blocked by one of the military vehicles. Doreen put her finger to her lips and then pointed. Heike nodded and went as far away from the door as possible. Time for the contingency, the shit-has-hit-the-fan plan, as Jonah would say.

She had nearly forgotten about it because it was always there, so much so that it had practically become part of the scenery. It was because Jonah had planned it so long ago, when he was still trying to think of ways anything could go wrong, whether it involved man or beast. It was kept unconcealed, and even Heike had grown used to it. She knew not to touch it because Jonah had allowed her to heft the weapon, and then he went about showing her how to fire it.

The point was to alleviate her curiosity but also for plan Z, for Heike to use it in self-defense if Jonah or even Doreen were somehow unable to. When Heike asked how it might come to that, Jonah insisted she would know. Since then, Heike had regarded the rocket launcher as if it were like any other piece of furniture in the cabin. Mostly because it hadn't moved since it was placed there.

Doreen's heart hammered nervously in her chest, even though Jonah had shown her how to handle the weapon and taken her through all the necessary

instructions on how to operate it, everything but actually firing it. Even then, they had gone through the instructions in a safe place and far from the cabin in case it accidentally went off because of the danger of the backblast once the weapon fired. “It would be a stupid way to die,” Jonah had said.

The rocket launcher accidentally going off inside the cabin next to the dinner table would be a stupid way for anyone to die, too, but because it was hardly ever hefted and handled it was regarded as safe. If they were worried about it being inside the cabin, then they would have had to clear the cellar of all the other weapons, too, and where did that end?

Doreen was nervous because she had never fired an American rocket launcher before. She hefted up the fiberglass tube, feeling its weight again. She hadn’t even touched it since Jonah had taught her how to fire it, not even to dust.

As she yanked the door open and stepped out onto the porch, she placed it over her right shoulder and was ready to depress the trigger and hit the middle vehicle, killing whoever was inside it, hoping the explosion would also debilitate the other two near it. The devastation might impact the lead vehicle, but it would definitely hinder the path of the rear one. She would have to aim in a way that wouldn’t also damage the truck she and Heike planned to use to escape.

Instead of firing the weapon, though, Doreen froze. Then she carefully lowered the rocket launcher and set it against the wall.

Heike pushed past her, off the porch and onto bits of slush and mud, almost slipping but instead falling into open arms. *“Opa!”*

As Doreen’s father, Henry, scooped up his granddaughter, Heike, hugging her, there were men standing alongside him.

When her smile went from her father, alive and well, to the one at the far end of the group with so much excitement it was practically disbelief—she was afraid all this was only a dream and not actually happening—the man she loved winked at her.

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GO LOUD

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CHAPTER 1

Death never cared about rank once. Nor was it concerned with operational security. It especially disregarded mission objectives.

Every battalion was armed to the teeth. The depth of the echelons didn't matter. Almost every battle tactic and strategy was irrelevant. Relying on what was useful during past wars to fight them was like using the same plans against a flood or a tornado. Or an erupting volcano.

What they should have done was avoid them from the start of the war, allow them all to pass by, and attack them from the rear. If only their movements were knowable. Their hunger and ferocity could not be determined by even experienced veterans.

Civilian casualties were unknown. Uncountable. Those without uniforms were warned to evacuate days ago. He hoped everyone did as instructed; by television broadcasts, newspaper headlines, word of mouth, and bullhorn by air.

But there were no safe areas for any humans. Not until the war ended. If it ever did, and if it did, hopefully in their favor.

It no longer mattered how many high-speed soldiers were activated. Or how well armed they were. What kind of destructive weapon systems were at their fingertips. The ground assault was being slaughtered.

Even the many expert pilots who flew the airspace coordination area were irrelevant at this stage of the battle. Every one of those men and women out there, who were still fighting, were elite. Doing the one thing they were all good at.

Except this time, the enemies were creatures of unknown origin. And it wasn't one country losing this war, but the entire human race. The first to fight, the tip of the spear, was broken. Destroyed.

All who remained were the rear of the spear and the rear was quickly crumbling.

Which was why formally illegalized weapons were reintroduced into combat, namely incendiary weapons. It was either change the laws, or ride the right thing to do into a nosedive toward extinction.

The decision made remained abundantly clear by the endless firebombing of the hills in the distance. He definitely approved. At least the command to avoid those grid squares were acknowledged by the soldiers under his command.

Current intel suggested the animals attacked at night. And Marty was tethered to Barry. It was reported happening throughout the rest of the world before comms with the other countries went dark. Current being the important word of the report.

Maybe the enemy attacking at night and Marty tethered to Barry, was what

was happening elsewhere on the planet, but differed here. Marty is attacking independently of Barry.

But also, Marty is attacking surviving well-trained humans as an army. No singles, or packs, but as a single unit. This was established by the view from the air.

Barry already did enough damage during the beginning of tonight's battle anyway, knocking over tanks, launchers, and howitzers, going after the weapon systems with fury, like bees going after someone stomping on a hive.

Before tonight's battle, the predictability of the enemy allowed them to position launchers around the city. But anticipating where the enemy would advance on the offensive changed nothing.

The positive of relying on the enemy hunting at night was that it gave them the opportunity to establish an offensive during daylight. The negative was everyone still alive was pinned down until dawn.

The proof of friendlies' immobility was that danger close missions were no longer being called in. The last of the rockets splashed the area of operation hours ago.

Still, he liked the idea of those bloodthirsty creatures looking up as they tried to identify the threat of steel rain pouring down on them moments before the artillery annihilated them within the target area.

The last of the burn squads were extinguished. Every soldier with a flamethrower on his back was KIA. It was reported and confirmed, when none of the soldiers made it to the areas of the offensive where they'd been ordered to reach.

There weren't even any more grenades being thrown. It was likely all soldiers on the ground expended all small arms, ammunition and explosives. And any soldiers who were still armed were KIA with guns in hand.

The current ongoing missions, that he was aware of, was by air. Chain gun barrels glowed red with continuous firepower from helicopters. Lone eyes brave enough to peek over the battlefield.

It was obvious even from his perspective; peering through binoculars behind the presently intact windows of the tactical operations center, helicopters couldn't remain airborne much longer.

Even with the predictability of enemy movements, mistakes were made. Not just by himself, but also higher.

Fueling stations were heavily guarded. This inadvertently drew in the creatures. Now there were no more personnel guarding what kept aircraft airborne, and far too many Molters to be handled.

There would be no more refueling opportunities. Pilots were briefed, and they no doubt briefed their crews.

Also, the enemy seemed to be guarding these positions. It was seemingly impossible that they could plan on their own, given current intel, but they were definitely hindering mission objectives before the sun could rise.

Drone strikes continued to deliver ordnance; but their payloads would soon

expend to zero. And there was no comms with drone pilots. Their missions were independent of *his* mission objectives.

Even if backup missions involving drones could be coordinated, doing so was a negative by the result of zero comms with higher command. He was alone in his commands.

Another chopper crashed in the midst of the battle.

Rescue those at the crash site or keep fighting? It was a decision preoccupying him hours earlier. There were too many downed aircraft for any rescue missions now. There wasn't one rescue team left to send. Not anymore. They were all already out there.

The downed helicopters exhausted their fuel. The radio transmissions, the maydays, were out of habit and training, to update higher, which was himself. Pilots and personnel knew there was no one coming for them except those creatures. Message sent and received.

The officer's last order had already been given by radio, and there were no more RTOs left in the tactical operations center—they'd all been sent out to fight—so he allowed the hand mic to finally release from his iron grip.

Seconds later the hills were engulfed in flames once again, and the jets responsible for dropping the napalm shrieked through the sky and reverberated over the tactical operations center, vibrating the floor and walls with their power.

At least there were still some aircraft, which were airborne. But they too wouldn't remain airborne much longer. At least no one was going down without a fight.

Too many targets. Too many enemies. The enemy numbers wouldn't reduce on their own. Nearly everyone who wasn't fed upon was joining their ranks by being infected and made into a fellow monster.

It didn't matter if this was the United States and every weapon system was at their disposal, or how high a ranking official was involved in the battle—like himself with all those stars representing the rank of General—the Molter War was a world war.

All military personnel were stripped of rank. Everyone with skin on their backs was the same now: human. And now every human was fighting to keep a place on this earth.

Overrun. He'd already heard it too many times over the net in the last few hours. Radio chatter—the current lack of it, other than from aircraft—confirmed it. He was ready to join his comrades. Whoever was still alive.

There were no more orders to give. No more *new* orders to give. Everyone received a final order. He'd given it minutes ago before dropping the mic, to anyone who might be listening: fire at will.

Mankind was doomed. Pulling the bayonet from its scabbard, he brought the blade parallel to his neck. Spying how sharp the edge was, he carefully angled the tip.

Then he sliced through the stitching on both sides of his lapel holding

down all those sown stars representing decades of achieved rank. He would judge himself and his entire life by his next actions, not what he'd done in the past. He tossed the bayonet onto the desk.

Sliding the chin strap of his Kevlar helmet securely over his chin, he shoved extra loaded magazines into the flak jacket draped over his comfy office chair. It was where he'd sat day after day, also many nights, since being stationed here.

Then he removed the armor plates from the front and back of the flak jacket and stacked them neatly over top-secret briefings. The papers should have been shredded or burned already, but the mission detail was irrelevant.

He threw the flak jacket over his shoulders and eyed the weapons on the desk. Automatic rifle, pistol, and bayonet. They were all the weapons he required for the last minutes that he would be alive. He grabbed the bayonet and secured it to the end of the barrel of his automatic rifle.

He would see how those monsters responded to rounds being fired by a man who could shoot forty out of forty with his eyes closed.

There were rumors that spread, the evolution of the enemy, was slower in other countries. Where climates were colder. He hoped it was true.

The Molter War began long before anyone knew about it. Militaries definitely weren't informed. Or prepared. Militaries were always preparing for the next human threat, not one comprised of bloodthirsty creatures.

Worldwide, any pockets of resistance were on their own. Hopefully, survivors could live at least a few more happy years.

The best of luck to them, he thought.

As he left the sanctity of the tactical operations center for the final time, using his thumb he flicked the selector switch of his automatic rifle from safe to fire.

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Five Years Later

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CHAPTER 2

Former Army grunt Jonah Browne was fought and despised. Argued with and detested. Even by those who cared about him, buddied with him, and claimed to have loved him throughout his life. Who actually did love him.

Arrogant. Manipulative. Burnout. And many variations of curse words because he used to be a man who drank too much alcohol.

And too often, too many drinks caused his fists to do the talking. So—pick an—expletive "that guy" was a common response after a night out with him.

Jonah wasn't always the man people wanted by their side in the past. Even he knew it. He was a different person back then—before he got sober—and he wasn't even the best man to have around during normal circumstances.

Except for one major exception; when the shit hit the fan.

Even when he was out of control, when he was either high or drunk—or both at the same time—or hung over, when something went wrong, people remembered him differently.

When life got squirrelly and dangerous, he was described as focused, dependable, strong. Once as heavy-handed, by someone he punched after a fistfight.

Throughout his brief military career, he was even called a crack shot—twice—by two officers. Both would have sooner gambled with their pensions than given out compliments.

Before Jonah was discharged from the military for selling drugs, when he slid and became the type of soldier even he despised, someone he never thought he'd be, his section chief mentioned wanting to clone him.

When everything went bad, he felt his life was over, because who would hire him?

After being shipped back to the states, the incessant thought often kept his eyes open at night, his view painting the ceiling.

So there had never been a better time for him to go on a vacation.

Then something cataclysmic happened to the world. A new species evolved, seeming to come out of nowhere. But they didn't come from nowhere. The animals metamorphosed from human beings to feed on blood. And they were worldwide.

No one ever knew the origin, never discovered subject zero, if there ever was one, and the men and women responsible for the investigation, who knew best, likely died fighting.

Jonah survived the beginning of the Molting, the vacation becoming a nightmare. Having lost friends he convinced to go along with him to Germany, it prompted him to take unnecessary risks in his personal war against the new enemy.

Depression anchored his thoughts and he believed it was his own wretched

behavior that got his friends killed. He believed it for so long, he felt he deserved to die too.

But another part of him knew something. And knew it well, because of similar experiences to compare to. Rigorous drilling, training, and experience in a war theater had created a warrior.

The part of him not dominated by depression won out by being stronger, so he decided to contribute himself to the war against the monsters. The decision kept him alive, and while surviving, he battled them any chance he got.

Then by the same chance he went to Henrytown and met Doreen, the woman who became the love of his life, and being with her changed him. Changed everything about his life. She sparked something in him so deeply, it began to burn his depression away.

Hotter and hotter until the flicker of flame Jonah once was, who was nearly snuffed out by regret and depression and unnecessary risks during his self-appointed missions, once again roared with the will to live.

Enough will to endure the horror which came next. Molters attacked Henrytown. An epic battle took place. It was shortly after surviving the battle that they drove to the cabin. But their troubles didn't end there.

While exploring and intent on finding a safer place to live, Jonah encountered survivalists, a well-armed and determined group who intended to use him—and others—as a sacrifice to their extremist ways.

Jonah survived the ordeal. Survived the architects of the barbaric Draw. And returned to the cabin. Except he wasn't alone.

Jonah accepted his role in the present world; he was a pillar of the war against bloodsucking monsters.

He evolved from being alone, depressed, and driving himself—literally and figuratively—to a planned and imminent suicide, to someone who had everything to lose. He used to be a fuckup, but today he was a man reborn, someone who would do anything to protect his people.

Jonah would rather die than devolve into who he used to be. Serving his side, human beings, and protecting others have become his choices.

The alternative means failure, which would mean his death. Then the pillar he represented would crumble, and the opposition to the Molting would be much weaker.

With everything mankind has done while living on Earth, some have said Molters are Earth's revenge, a defense mechanism, viewing human beings as a plague, and similar to how antibodies fight off an infection within a being.

Molters are nature's last resort to wipe out the human race so that new life can begin because earthquakes, tornados, floods, hurricanes, wildfires, disease after disease after disease, have not succeeded.

Nature has bumped it up another notch. Nature is going to take human beings out and start over. No matter the cost.

That's what some say anyway.

But Jonah disagreed. He disagreed with every ounce of his being. Hunted

or not.

Molters are just another enemy we will conquer.

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CHAPTER 3

They were safe. Worrying during the drive couldn't be helped, and Jonah wasn't sure what he'd find when they drove up the long dirt road leading to the cabin.

He'd felt a tickle of pride seeing Doreen aiming the rocket launcher before—thankfully—setting the weapon system down on the porch after seeing recognizable faces.

He took a mental snapshot because he wasn't sure he would ever experience something like it again. Not while dealing with Frox and Perry and the rest of the nefarious, brainwashed, and indoctrinated people who implemented the Draw.

But Jonah was especially worried that he'd never see them again during the epic battle.

What a moment, Jonah thought.

"Hello, Daughter."

Doreen looked to Jonah, then to Henry, then to him again. It was as if she couldn't believe the reunion was actually happening.

Until she burst into tears, transforming into a little girl right before his eyes. When she went to her dad, Henry embraced his daughter and granddaughter both—Heike was already mashed against him.

Practically at the same moment, Heike broke from her embrace of her grandpa and crashed against Jonah.

Heike wrapped both arms around his waist. "I told her you'd be back!"

"You're so smart." Jonah flattened a hand on her head. "Wow, you've grown since I left."

"Really?"

"I think so." He smiled down at her. "Thanks for believing in me."

"Of course!"

"Your face?" Doreen said.

Henry clearly wasn't concerned about his wounds. "I'm OK."

"I'm so happy you're here at our ho—I mean the cabin."

"Yes, sir," Jonah agreed. "I mean, Henry. Sir. Old military habit."

"It's all right. I like the sir stuff."

Doreen slowly walked her way toward the man she loved, and it was obvious he'd been in a fistfight and lost too, like her dad.

She placed a hand against Jonah's bearded cheek, stared into eyes mirroring love for her, and gave him a kiss on the lips.

Then Jonah hugged his woman. "I love you. So much."

"I love you, too. Thanks for bringing him home."

"He brought *me*, Doreen." When she leaned back, he said, "Tell you later."

Doreen tugged at the bottom whiskers of his long brown beard. "We're

going to have to do something about this soon. It's out of control."

"Ow. Hey, it ain't even summer yet."

"Oh, I see. Those are the rules, huh? You get to look like a barbarian until then?" She studied him. "We're not staying, are we?"

Jonah shook his head.

"I didn't think so."

Jonah wasn't about to explain because there was no definitive plan, but they couldn't remain here. His mission to find a safer place to live had failed. It didn't mean the next mission attempting to accomplish the same thing would.

She gave him another peck on the lips, another squeeze, and then went to Heike. "Now we can pack appropriately."

"Not yet though, right, Mom?" Heike whined.

Doreen turned, and Jonah shook his head.

"No," Doreen said to Heike. "Not quite yet. In the meantime, you'll need to think about which games you want to bring along."

"How many can I choose?"

"Two."

"Two?" Heike tucked herself under her mom's arm. "OK, I'll think about it and then choose my favorites."

Although they already embraced before in the UV on the ride to the cabin, Henry gave Jonah a handshake capable of breaking bones. "You kept my girls safe. Thank you."

"Whatever it takes."

Henry grinned, and nodded. Another signal of gratitude but this one even more meaningful. It was a hell of a feeling to know Henry approved of him. Jonah felt as proud as he could remember.

"Looking good, Doreen." Salgado pointed at Jonah. "Too bad you're with this chump."

"Hey," Jonah said.

"Thanks, Salgado," Doreen said, staring at Jonah. "I like him."

Jonah mouthed, "I like you too."

Heike held her arms out. "And I like everyone!"

Laughter spread easily since the inhabitants of the cabin had more than doubled to include Henry, Nico, Salgado, and Philip.

Jonah wondered how many of the men experienced such a reunion. No doubt some of them were parents.

Heike backed up and pointed at Salgado. "I remember you when you visited Henrytown. You're the one who swears all the time."

"*Heike*," Doreen said in her mom tone.

Salgado laughed. "No, I don't, you little tattle-tale. Not around little girls . . . unless they're sneaking around and I say something by accident. You still a little trouble maker?"

Heike flashed a mischievous grin. "Maybe. Who are these gentlemen?"

Henry laughed. “Where are my manners? Doreen, Heike, this is Nico and Philip.”

Both men nodded, and Doreen waved. “It’s nice to meet you both.”

Heike peered up at Nico. “Do you always wear a scarf and goggles?”

“Heike, be polite,” Doreen said.

“Sorry. I get curious.”

Nico looked to be chuckling under the desert tan, military scarf he wore. “It’s all right,” he muffled. “Yes, I do.”

Jonah had been introduced briefly to Nico and Philip, but everyone would get to know one another better in time. After what they’d been through, any type of reunion was appreciated, even among strangers. Jonah definitely did.

Except for Nico, there were as many smiles on as many faces.

But then Jonah felt a war gear begin rotating like a sudden shift in the wind. And the obvious: daylight was burning.

His view coated the three military vehicles, covering them like a net. His battle instincts took in every detail, doing his best to judge their operational status even while the hoods were down. Also, the backup truck.

Jonah didn’t know where Henry’s truck ended up. Perry knocked him out with a hard punch so it might still be parked at Fort Perry for all he knew. He wished he could have handed Henry the keys.

Jonah had already apologized to him during the drive to the cabin, but Henry couldn’t have cared less. “Just a truck,” he’d said.

Henry’s truck served Jonah well. It got him and Doreen and Heike to the cabin after the battle of Henrytown. And it was the same truck he drove for the mission to find a safer place to live.

The mission failed, but the truck never failed him. It was curious how much Jonah got attached to it, but like Henry said, it was just a truck.

The truck—or any vehicle—could be replaced, just as any useful tool. Henry’s reaction was one Jonah could learn from. And should remember.

Four vehicles—three UVs and one pickup—were at their disposal at the moment. There was bullet damage from the battle all over the up-armored UV with the SAR at the gunner’s hatch, but all four of them looked to be fully mission capable.

He glanced down at the tires. They were all snow tires and still looked to be sturdy and plump with air. He wasn’t worried. There were five air compressors in the cellar. And patch kits.

UVs had served him well in the past. Other than them being quite the pain in the ass to keep running. The three before him looked like they would continue to be as functional as he hoped they would be.

Working with a team of people to keep vehicles running instead of just himself and Doreen was a game changer. The more vehicles in a convoy the better, and four would serve fine for what he was beginning to plan, except the more vehicles, the more fuel required.

It wasn’t like it was years ago when Molters were more predictable, how

the majority—or all—hunted at night. That was when he could access fueling stations at military bases as he pleased. Surely all the fuel was used up by now.

But even if there still was fuel at fueling stations, and accessing them was a reliable certainty, relying on the ability to evade Molters hunting night or day was not.

Much and more had changed since the Molting began, so he needed to convince the others it was best to leave the cabin; not just the cabin but the territory. And sooner rather than later.

Dormant war gears linked to his inner soldier were always well-lubricated, whether activated or not, but right now they were all rotating blurs.

"I know that look," Salgado said, staring at him. "Don't worry, I got your back."

Jonah gave him a grin.

"I will be right back," Doreen said.

Doreen dodged into the open door of the cabin, careful not to kick over the rocket launcher she'd set down on the porch against the wall.

Jonah's reaction was to ask her where she was going but she was as capable as any soldier he'd ever met. She knew what she was doing.

Salgado went over and hefted the rocket launcher. "Nice."

"Hey," Heike said. "That's mine."

"You wish, kid." Salgado carefully aimed away from all of them and was even mindful of the back blast danger. In case it accidentally fired. "Are you chewing gum?"

Heike chomped. "Yes."

"May I have a piece?"

"Yes, you may. Here."

"Thanks."

With Doreen out of sight, Henry said to Jonah, "Sorry for not being here sooner."

"You do not have to apologize. You are now." Jonah studied him as they spoke quietly. "What the hell happened?"

"It's a long story."

"Answer one question," Jonah said. "How did you stay alive?"

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CHAPTER 4

It could mean certain death but he didn't care.

Get back to your daughter. Get back to your granddaughter. Help Jonah share the burden.

The guards left about ten minutes ago, so it was just Archard in there with him. It was the moment he'd hoped for. Ever since he'd been abducted. In order to make it happen, it required him to be a bit more compliant.

Including faking depression, which was difficult. His acting was poor but it was enough for Archard to think he'd broken and was close to indoctrination. Archard thought that Henry was compliant enough to be transported to the next cell location.

Since Archard holstered a .45-caliber pistol on his hip, and there were armed men outside, Archard believed it was enough to keep Henry under control if he rebelled again.

Henry grabbed Archard by the scruff of his neck when he was stupid enough to turn his back on him on the way out of the tent. He got a firm grip on his green fatigues too.

The way Archard reacted was like he'd hoped Henry would do it. That was how fast a lightning quick elbow met Henry's cheek. The blow broke the silence in the small space of the tent, and Henry felt like he'd been shot with the .45 caliber pistol.

But Archard didn't call out for assistance to the armed men he'd brainwashed, as Henry feared he might. The way Archard glowered, Henry thought he should probably try and strangle him to death before it occurred to him.

Although Henry didn't know where Archard served and for which military, he was clearly trained to fight hand-to-hand. Plan of action or not, Henry instantly found himself on the dirty floor of the tent with Archard atop him, swinging away.

The open cell door was still within reach. Henry's hand was knocked away before he could use the door to stand up.

Archard didn't say a word to him. He'd realized his mistake.

Archard also wasn't planning on implementing Henry among the ranks anymore. He wasn't going to put him in another cell to contribute further to the Draw either. He wasn't concerned about any purpose that Henry could continue to serve.

All Archard cared about, what he wanted to do, was to kill Henry for betraying his trust.

Trust Henry happily betrayed. He owed the lunatic nothing.

Henry endured punch after punch after punch. Every inch of his face received a heavy-handed fist. But he'd gotten his ass kicked before. And he'd

even lived through a Molter attack.

Archard's calloused hands squeezed Henry's throat. Since the fight was somewhat reversed—strangling was what Henry wanted to do to Archard—it allowed Henry to get a hold of the pistol on Archard's hip.

He strengthened his grip on the handle, but Archard's sweaty hand squirmed under it, and yanked the pistol out of the holster.

Archard swung the barrel to Henry's temple. Henry grunted, stabbing his arm downward, digging into Archard's forearm, *clattering* the pistol off the open cell door as it fell inside it.

Archard leapt off Henry, and dodged into the cell.

Henry raised a booted foot and kicked the door shut, and Archard aimed the .45-caliber pistol in his direction, the barrel protruding out the narrow gap as the door bounced back open.

Henry reached and tore the gun from Archard's grasp to Archard's shocked surprise, as well as his own.

There was a brief moment.

Both men rammed their side of the door.

Archard, ironically, was trying to desperately escape a cell of the Draw, and Henry was trying to keep him in there by pushing with all his strength and body weight behind his six feet five inches.

Both were grunting and swearing under their breath, practically face to face during the reverse tug-o-war.

Henry sprung back, aiming the gun, Archard's gun, as the door ricocheted, but not with enough time for Archard to right himself from falling over. His thick black eyebrows rose closer to his gray hair.

Henry fired three times. The bullets disappeared into his chest.

Archard crumpled in a heap. A hand reached out on the floor as the cell door tapped it, nearly closing on its own.

Exhausted, Henry sat down on the floor, and seconds later, the men outside started yelling.

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CHAPTER 5

Henry didn't have to explain anymore. Neither of them needed a history lesson.

Jonah shook his head. "I should have been fighting alongside you the whole time."

"A rearview mirror is full of different paths," Henry said. "I hate to think of what might have happened. I did my part. And you did yours. And now you'll get another shot to do what you do best."

Jonah glanced around, seeing everyone busy talking among themselves. Doreen was still in the cabin. She would likely appear momentarily.

Jonah leaned toward Henry. "I'd like to ask your permission to marry your daughter."

It didn't come out as smoothly as he'd imagined. Henry's reaction was probably as close to gasping as he'd done during his entire life. He clearly wasn't expecting such a request, especially today, but Jonah had thought about it for a long time. Years.

And he honestly never thought he would get the chance to ask Henry, thinking him dead, so now was as good a time as any. But, to Henry's amusement, Jonah was still nervous for some reason.

Henry thought about it. As he did, Jonah held his breath.

"You haven't proposed yet?"

Jonah shook his head. "I wanted your permission."

"At Henrytown, Doreen mentioned you were married before."

"Yes, sir. I was. But I was a younger man then and desperate to begin a normal life as the result of being deployed. War zones make you think about what is important. I was right about marriage, but I was too young, and I picked the wrong woman to marry first. I was supposed to be with Doreen all along. But I hadn't met her yet."

"OK. Yeah. You have my permission." His tone expressed cautious optimism, one aware of present dangers. "Promise me you won't die on her. OK?"

"OK. I promise."

Henry gave him an approving nod, patted him on the back, and they turned toward the cabin door as Doreen reappeared excitedly with something in hand.

Jonah wiped his sweaty hands on his army green pants. Doreen held the hand-drawn calendar she drew to show how many days it had been since last seeing her father.

Doreen held it up. "I marked every day since we last saw you."

Henry grinned. "Well, I'm glad you don't have to make any more *Xs*."

"Me too."

Doreen withdrew a lighter from her pocket and lit the calendar pages on fire. Flames rose up from the paper quickly and she set them carefully on the wet ground.

As they blackened into curly ashes, she gently stepped on them to extinguish the embers, sending a spiral of light smoke into the air.

Salgado gave Jonah a look. He was probably thinking they should hold off on producing any smoke. Jonah agreed but didn't say anything either. Salgado smiled. The smile seemed forced.

Neither of them wanted to ruin the moment. But it was another reminder that Jonah wasn't the lone former soldier present with war gears rotating.

Doreen, another former soldier but currently more in mother-daughter mode, sighed. "We're all together."

"Nearly all," Henry said.

Doreen's hopeful eyes went to him. "Before we get to any more exciting news and who it may involve, we could hole up here for a while longer. I haven't even invited any of you in. Rude of me. Until we come up with a definitive plan of what comes next."

She looked to Jonah for reassurance. Jonah was about to tell her what he thought they should do, which was to get on the road as soon as possible, but Henry took the words right out of his mouth.

"We're not staying."

Doreen wore a familiar expression. Expectation halted, then altered, and a smile blossomed. "Then I have an idea."

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CHAPTER 6

Doreen's instincts as a nurturer were never sated, even when the stakes were high. The pan was filled with steaming meat. There were canned beans heated in a pot. There was even freshly made bread meant for their next meal.

The stack of plates with utensils on top shrank away as people dished up, and also helped themselves to freshly brewed coffee.

Some sat at the picnic table to eat and drink. Others stood. They weren't all coffee drinkers, but everyone was hungry, especially those who'd been part of the battle at the firing line.

"Sorry for the smorgasbord," she said.

"Sorry?" Salgado forked a steaming bite far too large for his mouth but his hunger swallowed it quickly. "My goodness, I love smorgasbords. This is the best meal I've ever had in my life. Thank you so much, Doreen. I was starving."

The rest of them thanked her as well, but Jonah said, "Maybe we should __"

"We have plenty," she said, cutting him off. Doreen beamed, as she loved to satisfy appetites. "You're all welcome. Isn't this wonderful?"

Jonah nodded to his future wife—hopefully she would accept his proposal—seeing a glimpse of the attentive grandmother she would one day be. She was definitely someone who wasn't afraid to speak her mind.

"It is," Jonah said. "I love you."

She stared back at him. "I love you too."

Salgado rolled his eyes. "Jeez, get a cabin, you two."

With the meal over, it was time to get to work. They grouped together. Except for Nico and Philip.

The men who'd helped save Jonah's life stood guard away from the cabin, close to a hill. They'd taken it upon themselves. It was where Jonah had hunted down Molters after returning from Heike's first hunt.

Even though Henry likely instructed them to keep an eye on things, their solid instincts told them where to stand guard. It was such a relief to share the burden, Jonah thought.

He called out to them. "Philip, Nico, you guys get enough to eat?"

The two men armed with automatic rifles gave a thumbs up in the distance.

"Need anything else?"

Philip cupped the side of his mouth. "To be left alone to do our duty!"

"Understood," Jonah said.

"It'd be nice if we could think of a way to exterminate all of them,"

Salgado said.

Jonah thought back to the nightmare they'd witnessed at the firing line, where not even the Behemoths were safe. "You saw what I did. There are probably hundreds of thousands."

"Shoot. More like hundreds of millions. They were never ending, man. OK maybe playing exterminator isn't such a solid plan. But they nap somewhere during the day and we know where a lot of them will be at night. Find 'em and light their asses on fire. Burn those fuckers up."

"Hey," Henry said while listening. "Language. My granddaughter."

Salgado *tsk*-ed. "My bad. So sorry."

Heike was standing there listening. "I told you."

"Ah, you little turkey . . ."

Doreen tittered, marched to Heike, and gently tugged on her purple coat. "Come on. Help me inside. We have more packing to do."

"Fine," Heike said, clearly wanting more to be a part of what was going on outdoors but still went along obediently.

"I've taken out quite a few nests myself," Jonah said. "If they wake up . . ."

"You mean when they're all dog-piled on top of one another?" Salgado said. "I'm thinking out loud is all. It's not like we can avoid them."

"There's too many," Henry said. "And we are too few. Unless one of you has a nuke in his back-pocket, we fight them when we have to."

"I agree," Jonah said.

"I suppose you're both right," Salgado said. "No sense we go looking for a fight we can't win. But before we decide on how we're going to get them or stay away or whatever, whichever we decide, anybody know who might have some extra guns stashed somewhere?"

Jonah grinned. "Oh, I may know someone."

"That's good, man. That's real good." Salgado twisted to see the ladies were inside. "Maybe Doreen had a point earlier. I mean, we're just talking, you know, but let's say we were dummies and stayed. The horde might actually pass us by."

"Or it could head directly here," Henry said. "By accident or on purpose. We're still learning about their behavior. Who knows?"

"We could live here and just be ready to drive."

"The road," Jonah said. "What if they head up it?" He thought maybe he should bring up all concerns. "Members of the Draw showed up here before. Something like that could happen again. And the likelihood of all of us together . . . is slim."

"Or they could end up in dang Russia."

"They're already in Russia. We gotta remember they're everywhere. Have to assume they're worldwide until we're certain otherwise."

They all seemed to agree because there was a moment of silence as they looked out in different directions.

Philip and Nico were the only ones currently armed, but the rest of them

could grab weapons quickly if there was any trouble.

The cabin's location was beautiful during the white of winter, but it was also quite the spectacle when the snow melted. There was so much green now.

"So," Salgado said awkwardly. "If we're not staying, where the heck are we going?"

Jonah gazed in the direction of the ridges, where he'd climbed to shoot and destroy Behemoth cocoons that were forming. The task would be necessary again soon if they remained much longer. He felt a pang at his core at the thought of the cabin no longer being considered home.

They were going to leave. And likely never return.

"There was a fortified area, where I was before," Henry said. "But I haven't been there since the Draw. We could see about going there."

"Where was that?" Jonah said.

"Near the firing line."

"So, likely overrun."

"We could build another fortification."

"It's not like fences keep them at bay."

"No," Henry said, no doubt thinking back to Henrytown too, "but we could have spotters with eyes on the horde and could constantly deviate from their path. Find a place, build it up."

"How is that different than remaining here?"

"You obviously have somewhere else in mind."

"While *I* was dealing with the Draw, I learned about a cruise ship."

Henry visibly mulled it over. "A ship, huh? If it's at sea, it's been in the water for a while. Wouldn't we be avoiding what we'll eventually have to deal with? I mean, we'll have to settle somewhere."

"True. But getting away from here, this country, far away, seems like it'll be safer."

"I think so too," Salgado said. "But it's human nature, isn't it? Different always seems better."

"There's degrees of danger throughout the world," Henry said. "Former soldiers understand best."

"True," Salgado said.

Jonah agreed. There was a big difference between a war happening in the desert in the Middle East, and the sandy beaches where he found himself on months later in California.

"I trust both of you and your judgment," Henry said. "If you think it's a solid plan, then I'll support it."

"I'm still thinking about it," Salgado said.

Salgado turned toward Philip and Nico and opened his mouth—

"Don't call out," Jonah said. "We'll ask them what they think later."

"You just called out to 'em to see if they were hungry still. You might as well have rung the dinner bell. Asked Molters the same thing."

Jonah smiled. "My bad. Thanks."

Salgado socked his shoulder. “Just saying.”

“I do want everyone to agree,” Jonah said. “We’re still alive so there’s a lot of wise minds among us. I don’t even include myself.”

“You should,” Henry said. “This is no time for modesty.”

“My point is, I’m not the primary decision maker anymore.”

“I get it. We must think how our decisions will affect the group. And those who will soon join us.”

A buzz grew in Jonah’s stomach thinking of other survivors. Maybe even people he knew from Henrytown.

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CHAPTER 7

Often the subconscious has all the building blocks for answers but is assembled out of order.

Jonah suspected the terrible dream about Molters and the ocean of blood—he still remembered the nightmare vividly, and thought about it often, even though it was months ago—allowed him to come to certain conclusions.

Even though, ironically, in the dream it was the opposite and the large body of water was brimming with creatures, seas and oceans and smaller bodies of water must be free of the Molter threat. They had to be.

Although he'd never completely dissected one, it wasn't as if Molters evolved gills. Molters were land-based predators so it made sense for humans to go to open water to be safe. And once on the water, there might be a path to a safer place to settle.

Jonah knew it was human nature to believe somewhere else or something different was better than present circumstances, as Salgado mentioned, but he was confident this time. Jonah had been wrong in the past, and admitted so, but he'd never been too far off.

Even though he was no longer in the military, one of its strengths was teamwork, a tool he'd kept in his toolbox, applicable right now, so he could bounce his ideas off the others. He didn't have to make all the decisions.

A benefit of no longer wearing a uniform was that there wasn't a requirement for one person to be in charge according to rank. Any of them could be the leader, and former soldiers were used to following orders, making it easier for anyone to give commands.

Jonah was a grunt and always would be. He was when he had served, considered himself to be one even when he'd been in charge, so he was always ready to follow orders too; especially someone with a better plan than his own.

But unless someone came up with a better idea, Jonah would continue to follow the best plan of action, and right now he was coming up with the best of them.

"Archard's firing line was overwhelmed, practically destroyed," Jonah said. "It was obvious, even with my limited viewpoint from the cell where I was imprisoned."

"I hated seeing you in there, man," Salgado said. "You didn't belong. Like seeing a caged tiger. I was so glad to get you out."

"Thanks again."

"Shoot, I don't mean to make it about me. You don't have to thank me about it again. I was just remembering."

"OK I won't. But know how much I appreciate you guys getting me back to my family."

"Ain't nothing."

"Even if hundreds of people join us, which isn't likely to happen, we still won't be able to take advantage of all of the weapons left there because the place was overwhelmed. If the horde rears its ugly head in this direction, remaining here is suicide."

"OK," Salgado said. "Agreed."

"So, where's the cruise ship?" Henry said. "We would need to know its precise location."

Jonah shrugged. "Unfortunately, I'm not sure. Perry wouldn't tell me. But cruise ships dock north. I remember hearing it from fellow soldiers when I was stationed here."

"You were stationed at this cabin?" Salgado said.

"No, not here-here, here in . . ." Jonah almost finished by saying Germany. But grinned instead. "Good one."

"I'm messing with you, homie. In all seriousness, you been there, right?"

"No."

"Oh, OK."

"You?"

"No, me neither."

Henry's eyes bore a hole in the ground, still deciding whether it was a good idea or not. "North."

"Yeah," Jonah said. "First port we come to at the North Sea. I think it's our best route."

Hopefully wherever they ended up going, maybe living, would be as fortified an area as Jonah imagined.

But he shouldn't—and wouldn't—get ahead of himself.

Henry glanced up, still looking down at them because of his six-foot five-inch height. "Then that's where we'll go. We'll get everyone together and figure out a path."

Salgado cleared his throat. "Actual roads hopefully. Streets. Paved. Autobahn."

"I hear you," Jonah said. "First things first, though. How many e-tools are there in those UVs?"

"A bunch," Salgado said.

"Hang on. I gotta grab something."

Jonah darted into the cabin to retrieve his hand-drawn map. The real one.

"How's it going in here?"

Doreen added to a pile of their belongings. "Nice to have a little more time."

Jonah thought so too. He could hear Heike busily condensing belongings in her room however Doreen had instructed her to.

"I'm going to take what we need and do my best to erase we ever lived here," Doreen said. "In case we encounter bad people again."

Jonah still hadn't told her what had happened while he was away. Him being abducted, surviving the Draw, any of it.

But Doreen grasped enough without knowing details. He would explain in time, if she asked. For now, he could trust her to do the right thing in here.

He went over, kissed her, and hustled back out.

"Over here," Jonah said, placing the hand-drawn map on the picnic table.

They crowded around, including Nico and Philip. Nico still hadn't taken off his scarf or goggles. Jonah decided he didn't mind his secrecy because it was none of his business. Nico accepted his role as a guard, and as a soldier in this war. It was all that mattered.

"Got the idea from you, Henry," Jonah said. "When you gave us the map to get here while we were in Henrytown."

Henry nodded approvingly. "What are we digging for?"

"Weapons and ammo. I—We've got lots of both."

"You have copies of the map?"

"Sure do."

"Easy for you to follow, but how will others know the way back?"

"We have radios."

"Yes, but it will be slow going if anybody gets lost. And we have only so much time before *they* arrive. Of course, we can't know when or if it will happen but . . . wise to assume it will be sooner than expected. And even if it doesn't happen and we never see one of those bloodsucking bastards again, we should still think we will."

"Totally agree." Jonah tried to think of anything else to assist them. "I have a flare gun."

"How many flare guns do you have?"

"One."

Henry tilted his head with uncertainty. Henry was right. There must be a better way to keep them on track. Again, Jonah gave it some consideration.

Then it came to him.

"Got it!" He went and unlocked the cellar and came back with a box, a fraction of the total. "I have thousands of these." He opened the box and took out a chem light. "Passengers can throw them out the window at intervals and follow the glow back."

"All right, now there's a plan," Henry said.

Salgado took a few steps toward the open door of the cellar. "What else you got in there?"

Jonah grinned. "You'll approve."

Salgado rubbed his hands together excitedly.

“Nico, it’s time. Hand me the mic,” Henry said. “You know the frequency.”

Nico opened the passenger door to the UV, leaned in to the radio, adjusted the frequency, grabbed the mic, and stretched the black cord out to Henry.

“While we’re digging, I’m going to have everyone meet us here.” Henry winked at Jonah, thumbing the mic. “Sven, do you copy?”

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CHAPTER 8

"What they kick you out for?" Salgado said.

Jonah cringed. "I did a fellow soldier a favor."

"Man, they don't kick you out of the military for doing people favors."

"Well, it's the kind of favor."

"What kind of favor you do for a battle buddy that gets you kicked out?"

"He was less a battle buddy and more of a loser. I sold what he was carrying."

"Guns?"

"No, no. Drugs."

"You did drugs?"

"Yeah. I did them too."

"So, it was just for selling them?"

"No. I pissed hot too."

"You dummy."

"I know. Probably saved my life though."

"Oh, it definitely did. You probably would have got killed fighting the first wave like everyone else. It's crazy how fucked-up shit can help you later on."

"True. And you only know that when you live long enough."

"*If* you live long enough. I'm so glad I was stationed here in Germany too."

Chatting helped pass the time as they drove, and Salgado was genuinely curious, which Jonah appreciated. Even if it stung a little to talk about.

"Now I bet you're one of these cats who don't do nothing. No drugs, no booze, no cigarettes, no coffee—"

"Whoa, slow down. Coffee is paramount to my existence. Even if it's stale, which it often is if it's already ground, I love it. Without it, I'd reinvent it. Somehow."

"Oh, OK. That don't make no sense, but I get it. I think. You must have a grinder?"

"Sure do."

"Booze was my vice. Didn't get me kicked out, though. Maybe it would have eventually. Hey, speaking of slowing down, how about you pick up some speed? Driving like an old man. In fact, how about you let me drive? I'll get us there quick."

"You don't even know where we're going. And you talk too much. You'll drive us off the road."

"*Pfft*. Whatever."

At the dig site—one too many, according to Salgado—and the last of them before heading back to the cabin, Jonah alluded to what had happened to his friends; Eric, Gil, Daisy, Sharon, and Danielle, and was busy explaining some theories.

Salgado stopped digging from the other side of the hole and held up a hand. He was out of breath.

Jonah kept on shoveling away more dirt. "What?"

"Do I really have to listen to this?"

Jonah stopped digging as well, holding the e-tool at waist height. "What?"

Salgado shook his head sympathetically. "I'm sure you've thought about them enough. Do you really want to talk about them, too?" Before Jonah could respond, he continued, "I don't need to know *why* they do the terrible things they do. I don't give a fuck about them. I avoid them or I kill them. You know what I'm saying?"

Jonah waited to see if he'd be interrupted. "Sure."

"And you get down too easy. Let all this stuff get to you. Molters weren't your fault. What happened to your buddies wasn't your fault either. You need to stay motivated, homie."

Jonah resumed digging as fast as possible, as he also mentioned to Salgado he hadn't been depressed in a long time. Too busy to be. It was a way to talk to someone else about it other than Doreen, also a way to see how normal he was.

But mentioning something in the past was often the first someone heard about it, so their present. Salgado, being a man, a former soldier as Jonah was, and a fast friend, definitely didn't hold back with his honesty.

Salgado read Jonah's mind. "Look, I get sad sometimes. Sure, I do. I got lots of stuff to say too, but I mostly keep it to myself because I don't want to burden anybody."

"You're saying keep it to myself? Keep things inside?"

Salgado cocked his head. "Come on, dude. You know what I mean. Talk if you have to, but don't dwell. It ain't good for you. Go for a walk. Go for a run —"

"I do."

"What?"

"Go for a run."

"Around the cabin?"

"Yeah. But not lately."

"Of course not. Too busy dodging monsters and bullets shot from crazies. How far?"

"I figured out a mile path."

"About how many laps you do?"

"Consistently?"

"Yeah."

"About three."

"When was the last time you went for a run?"

Jonah thought about it. "I don't remember."

"That's too long. Once we get to where we're going, we'll go on a run together."

"It'll probably be a jog. I haven't truly *run* in a while."

"Look how fat I am. I know how it goes. But saying we're going for a run sounds cooler than going for a jog."

"Sounds like a plan."

"*Word*. So, as I was saying, unless it's worth bringing up because it's serious, I'd rather say something funny."

"You should have kept your mouth shut this whole time then." Jonah was sweaty as he dug, feeling cool spots beneath his clothing. "You haven't made me laugh yet."

"Oh yeah, it's funny you even said so. Don't lie to me, man. You know I'm a comedian."

"All right. You got me."

Salgado shrugged. "I care about my battle buddies is all. If you really need to talk, of course I'll listen to you, dude. I don't need to be funny all the time."

If someone like Salgado, who always seemed like he was in a good mood, got down sometimes too, for some reason it made Jonah feel better about his woes.

But men could talk about their feelings for only so long. Especially when Jonah raised his head up and noticed Salgado was still no longer digging.

"Hey! We gotta get this done!"

"I thought we were having a moment."

"Moment's over."

"There *ain't nothing here, though*. Seriously, how deep did you bury everything? And how do you know this isn't one of those fake places you made with an empty tarp?"

"I'll prove it if you help dig."

"I already dug up a bunch at those other sites."

"Yeah, but not lately."

"What kind of nutcase decides on some random number like thirty-one anyway, and in the direction of where the sun rises or sets or whatever the fuck? Who would do this crazy shit?"

"It's good you're getting all your swears out away from the cabin and young ears."

"Why do you think I'm doing it so much?"

"Thirty-one paces north, south, east, or west from the direction of the cabin. I told you. It's preventative."

"Yeah, no kidding, but it *prevents* me from knowing what to do even after you explain it to me."

"In detail."

"Yeah. Exactly. How do you think the other guys are doing? You see their

faces before we left? They're probably as confused as I am and just as pissed. Walking around in circles and cursing your name."

Molters and the gravemounds they dig to bury their kills had given Jonah the idea to bury supplies. He appreciated Salgado's humor, but didn't want to ruin it with the real.

Standing up straighter, Jonah thrust his shovel toward Salgado dramatically, brought it back close to his waist, turned it downward and stuck it in the dirt, scooped out dirt, and then tilted his head up at him and smiled.

"Get it?"

"Oh, that does it." Salgado started digging again. "I'm gonna school you now. I still think what I think, though. This would be going a lot quicker if you didn't make it so stinking complicated."

"I didn't know we would be doing this today."

"What do you mean? If you didn't know, why did you do it so ass backwards? You knew you were going to one day, right?"

"I already told you . . . Hey, man, less talking. More digging."

"Oh, OK. We'll compare when we're done."

"Compare what? The UV is full and we didn't keep track."

"Fucking . . . piles of dirt homie!"

"There's only so much daylight."

"Keep it up, Jonah. Keep it up."

Jonah and Salgado had already dug up so much of what Jonah buried he would need to redraw his maps if he ever intended on digging up more burial sites. Thankfully, he remembered to cross them off his hand-drawn map.

Combined with what was dug up at the other dig sites, they'd crammed the UV completely full. There wouldn't even be much room for them in the driver and passenger seats.

Hopefully, the others who were assigned the same task, didn't have as much trouble as Salgado complained about.

Jonah reached down and scraped dirt away from a tarp full of weapons. "Time to go back."

"Finally." Salgado's humor faded. "What's in there you think?"

"Open it up and find out. Honestly, I don't remember."

"Shocker." Salgado plucked at the tarp with a gloved hand before finally taking the glove off. "Hopefully there's no spiders in here."

"Seriously?"

"I ain't the only one scared of spiders. I even lied when I enlisted."

"Yeah, what else did you lie about?"

"None of your business." Salgado carefully plucked at the tarp zipper as if it were filled with flying tarantulas. "Rifles. This really helps. All of it. Good work."

"Thanks."

Salgado grew serious. "Even with an arsenal, I just hope at the end we're not scared and screaming anyway. I don't want to go from who we are to

frightened animals. You know what I'm saying?"

"We won't," Jonah assured him. "We'll die old men."

"When we're old, let's get together and go for a run," Salgado cleared his throat, "I mean a run, but a run that's actually a jog, and laugh about all this."

"Definitely."

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CHAPTER 9

When they drove up, there were familiar faces and also some unrecognizable ones. Doreen distributed leftovers from the meal she'd made earlier. Jonah knew better than to mention anything about saving the food for the road. There was plenty.

Someone came out of the outhouse, and someone else went in. Both newcomers. Strangers. Jonah wasn't sure how many new people to expect but for some reason, he was ready for a hundred to be waiting.

Turned out there were six more, thankfully not all of them strangers, and all six arrived in two pickup trucks. Combined with the UVs, it made six vehicles altogether.

Not nearly as many vehicles as Jonah imagined driving north, but they would be enough to distribute and load up everything acquired from the dig sites.

With six more people that made thirteen altogether, it felt like they were arriving at a party. It was refreshing. A long time coming. But, also, rather overwhelming. Jonah had been solo for a long time and it'd been years since he'd been amongst a group.

The last group of strangers attempted to murder him.

His stomach fluttered. He was nervous. Strange, because of all the danger he'd lived through. Not just him, but also everyone else, Jonah remembered. He wondered if they were thinking the same way.

No matter how normal he was feeling, how human, it vanished, suddenly engulfed by a familiar fog. A blip on his inner radar snapped him into focus. Everyone was facing one another. Their backs were to the forest surrounding them.

Although it was obvious it was already a happy reunion, Jonah proceeded to scan the area to ensure they were not being hunted.

Salgado stared at him as he stepped out of the vehicle. "I got you. You go visit. I'll keep an eye out."

Jonah gave him a curt nod. He and Salgado never served together. They went on one self-assigned mission before Jonah made his way to Henrytown. Then they fought together at the firing line.

But ever since, he'd felt like they were battle buddies and they'd been friends their whole lives. Jonah trusted him.

Salgado noticed Jonah's hesitation. "Don't be scared. Too easy to get up in your head these days. Everybody loves you. Let's go."

Jonah grinned at him. Jonah was quite social when he was young, but many years had passed since then. These days, he was more comfortable in mission mode. But he was happy to see others, especially those he knew.

Alive, as he'd always hoped. And at the cabin. It would have been great if they could have stayed and continued to live there. Build other cabins near the one. The land was flat enough. They could build another Henrytown.

Henry wouldn't want his name on the new sign but Sven had made a joke about it years ago, how there would be a Sventown. He was sure Sven wouldn't object. Thankfully, Jonah would be able to ask him if he wanted.

Sven, who'd been Henrytown's doctor, was among those newly arrived. He was examining Henry, no doubt discussing the cuts and bruises on his face from his fight with Archard. Of course there was a cigarette hanging out of Sven's mouth.

"Philip, Nico," Salgado shouted, "either of you have trouble finding stuff at Jonah's dig sites?"

Both of them had been tasked with doing the same as Jonah and Salgado, but they shook their heads.

"Whatever! You two are liars!"

There was laughter. Jonah knew his burial method was cryptic but the mission had been successful. The proof was the extra weapons Nico and Philip laid out on the tarps. Some of them Jonah had buried years ago.

Trusting his battle buddy's mission to guard everyone, Jonah couldn't wait to shake hands. He glanced over everyone in sight: Doreen, Henry, Salgado, Donnelly, Jacobs, Bernard, Sven, Nico, Philip, and a few who he hadn't met yet. But he was about to.

Jonah made his way toward the group when he stopped short, noticing who was missing.

"Where's Heike?" Jonah threw looks in every direction. She wasn't in sight. "Heike. Where is she?"

Doreen pointed. "She's inside."

Heike popped out the door onto the porch. "I'm here, Jonah."

"She's OK," Doreen reassured him.

Jonah relaxed. Bad things happened too quickly these days. He needed to make sure Heike was safe.

"Looks like you got a full load," Doreen said. "Well done."

Glancing back at the crammed UV before marching toward the group, he said, "Thanks."

Sven waved, flicked what remained of the ash of his cigarette off and stomped it on the ground, and put the empty butt in his coat pocket.

Jonah waved back. "Good to see you're all . . ." Jonah nearly said alive. "Here."

He remembered fearing that the first Molter he saw attack Henrytown might have molted Donnelly, Salgado, or Jacobs. He was so glad it was only a fear. All three of them were alive and well.

Bernard, who'd lived at Henrytown as the cook, had been a lot heavier the last time Jonah saw him, so he'd clearly lost a lot of weight.

As Sven got nearer, Jonah said, "Still smoking, I see."

"Yes, yes. To my embarrassment. Giving me trouble already?"

"You deserve it."

"If you say so. How are you feeling, Jonah?"

"Always great."

"How's your lower back?"

Jonah's injury from the first battle with a Behemoth was a distant memory. As he thought about his physical condition, he realized he felt stiff, was still sore from his fistfight with Perry and likely would be for a few more days.

It was the toughest fistfight of Jonah's life and the stakes were never higher. Losing would have meant his death. He wasn't going to talk about it, though. Bringing it up would bring up too much more, and he didn't want to focus on bad men right now.

This was a time for healing. Jonah respected Sven's professionalism. Good doctors always started from the beginning of a diagnosis.

"My back?" Jonah said. "It's OK. I don't drive often so that's about the only time I feel it. If I sit for too long on a chair, I get twinges every once in a while, and it bothers me . . . But it's fine."

"Good. Let me have a look at you. Open your mouth. Stick out your tongue. Say 'ah'."

Jonah did and Sven peered into his throat.

"OK then. No sickness in anyone? Normal sickness I mean."

"Nope," Jonah swallowed and coughed to the side. "All good."

"Very funny. Good to know."

"How about you? How are you?"

"All things considered, I am well."

"As you said years ago, do not discount the resiliency of human beings. I'm glad you told me once. It's helped."

"Resilience."

"What?"

"I said resilience, not resiliency." Sven smirked, seemingly at himself. "Same meaning. Never mind. It does not matter."

Jonah laughed. "OK." Then he thought of something far more important. "Did you examine Doreen?"

"I did. She is healthy, I assure you."

"Thank you."

"You're welcome."

No doubt Doreen had mentioned her miscarriage to Sven.

"I understand we're heading north to the sea. This is wise. Even if Molters find us there, they will mill about on shore in frustration."

"Molters can't swim?"

"Of course not. They're a new species. They haven't established generations of natural instincts to do so. Surely there are others who've discovered the fact but with communications down, it isn't widely known."

Jonah laughed. He couldn't help it. "I didn't realize all I needed this whole

time to combat them was a kiddie pool." Noticing Sven's seriousness, it'd surely been a harsh lesson. "What happened?"

"We, myself, and a few others, who are no longer with us, came across a young girl stranded on a dock in the middle of a lake. Fortunate to our position, Molters were flooding the shore opposite us. They kept trudging into the water."

"But they didn't resurface?"

"Not a one."

"Following one another."

"We waved to get the girl's attention, she waved back, dove in, and swam for us."

"Fast thinking."

"We didn't think she would make it to shore. Poor little thing. She was so exhausted. I could see her shivering even before she dove into the water."

"How did the Molters react?"

"They got wise and started around in an attempt to get to us. We readied our weapons but didn't have to fire a shot. Exhausted and soaked little Patty ran up on shore, into our vehicle, and we sped away. The first Molter reached our position seconds later."

Jonah motioned to a dark-haired girl a few years older than Heike. "She must be her. Patty?"

"She is."

Heike and Patty were talking and laughing. It made Jonah smile. Heike had made a friend. Patty waved to Sven, and Sven waved back.

"I never thought of it," Jonah said. "Them not being able to swim."

"Yes, yes. Water isn't a way to fight them during typical battle conditions. The question is, can they learn to swim?"

Sven seemed to want to continue the conversation, but changed his mind. Because Jonah and Sven had fallen into discussion so quickly, it felt like no time had passed between today and Henrytown.

But so much *had* happened. To all of them. And Jonah wondered about all Sven had been through.

"We'll chat more later," Sven said.

"Yes, we will," Jonah agreed.

"Salgado," Sven said, "where do you think you're going?"

"Hey, Jonah made me guard the perimeter."

"You're next for an examination."

"Aww, man. I hate going to the doctor."

Jonah laughed as Sven marched purposefully toward him.

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CHAPTER 10

Bernard shuffled into Jonah's view. "You're too skinny, American."

"You're one to talk."

Bernard patted his slim midsection. "Doreen fed us. I hope that was all right."

"Absolutely. Did you eat enough?"

"I did. We all did. Thank you."

"You're welcome. Seeing you takes me back to *your* kitchen. I bet you miss preparing meals as much as we miss enjoying them."

"I do. I really do. Such a terrific distraction, like you soldiers going on missions. As soon as I can, once it's safe—wherever we end up going—I'm going to do something about it."

Jonah clasped his shoulder. "I look forward to it. I think we all do."

"Good to see you."

"You too."

"Jonah Molter-killer-Browne."

Jonah turned. "How you doing, brother?"

"Good, man," Donnelly said. "Real good. Went on one mission together. Feels like a hundred, doesn't it?"

"It does."

Donnelly still wore the same baseball cap on backward and still impressed Jonah as a team leader. Donnelly and Jacobs naturally grouped together, as they had when Jonah had first met them.

Jonah eyed the rifleman. "Same weapon?"

Jacobs lifted the pristine automatic rifle up slightly in admiration. It had probably been cleaned that morning. "It is. How can we help?"

Jonah eyed the vehicles. "What's the status of the engines in those trucks?"

"Fully mission capable."

"Talk to Doreen. She'll have something for you to do."

Doreen overheard the command, smiled, and waved them over. Donnelly and Jacobs went to her for further instructions.

"Are we all going to stay together now?" Heike said.

"Sure, we are," Salgado said, walking past them as he guarded the perimeter, "what do you think?"

Heike's new friend, Patty, whispered something to her and she giggled.

Further introductions were necessary. Even though Jonah knew almost everyone, he still felt like a guest. He headed toward one of the strangers. He was on his way to introduce himself to the man he didn't know, when he felt someone step up behind him.

"You Jonah?"

Jonah spun to see Patty staring up at him.

“I am.”

“I’m thirteen, just so you know. Older than Heike if you ever need a babysitter.”

“I don’t need a babysitter!”

“Exactly what I said when I was your age. But guess what? I did.”

“Jonah,” Heike towed the spunky, dark-haired thirteen-year-old closer by her hand. “This is my friend, Patty.”

Jonah waved. “Hello, Patty. It’s nice to meet you.”

“Nice to meet you, too. So, how long were you a soldier?”

“How did you know? Did Heike tell you?”

“No. It’s obvious. I have uncles who walk like you . . . I meant had.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Me too. How long did you serve?”

“Long enough, kid.”

“You were in the war? The one before this one?”

“I was.”

“Good to know.”

He smiled at her. “Thanks, I guess.”

Patty was assertive and even though she was young, she reminded Jonah of female officers he knew while in the military.

Sven had told him about how she was found and rescued. Who knew everything else she’d been through? She obviously wasn’t here with her parents.

He wondered what happened to them briefly but didn’t wonder long. The Molting happened. As it had to all of them.

Heike towed Patty around, showing her places around the cabin: the picnic table, where her room in the cabin was located from outside. Jonah heard her mention something about a snowman. Then they headed for the woods.

“Not too close to the wood line,” Jonah called to her.

Heike spun. “I’m showing her which direction we go hunt.”

“You can point, OK?”

“OK.”

Jonah crossed paths with Doreen. “You keeping them busy?”

Doreen rolled her eyes. “If I told them we needed to knock the cabin down and rebuild it before we left, they would. The answer to your question is yes.”

Jonah nodded approvingly, and Doreen was still smiling.

“What?”

“They look alike. Heike and Patty.”

Doreen was right. The girls did. Maybe it was why Jonah liked Patty already.

“I’m so happy. Our little girl has made a friend.”

Jonah smiled at her, even though Patty had been here for how long, a few hours? Jonah gave her a quick hug and both of them went on their way.

Compared to the kids Heike knew who were her age, and how little time she spent with them, Patty was indeed a friend. The last time she'd played with other kids was in Henrytown. That had been years ago. Mothers could be so optimistic.

Once they arrived at their destination, who knew where Patty would go from there? Still, Doreen's happiness made Jonah love her even more.

Jonah looked around for the stranger he'd seen, the man he wanted to introduce himself to, and saw Sven staring at him. He was obviously chewing on another thought.

Jonah mouthed, "Rain check."

Sven gave him a thumbs up. They could, and likely would, contemplate and hypothesize for hours.

The man had brown curly hair and a reddish beard. Sometimes hair color and beard color were different. A lit cigarette hung out of his mouth. Even though Jonah quit a few years ago, the initial scent of a smoke always made him crave a butt.

He noticed Jonah as he was folding blankets and stacking them into the bed of a pickup truck. "You must be Doreen's guy?"

"I am."

"Got it."

Jonah didn't blame him. If he were in his shoes, he'd be wondering exactly how single Doreen was too.

"I like to know who everyone is and where they came from."

"Understandable. Yeah, I get it. I should have walked over and introduced myself earlier."

"Well, I only recently returned. That's not what I meant. I meant, who were you with before you got here?"

The conversation was already going much more awkwardly than Jonah would have wanted. It had been way too long since Jonah had socialized normally. He needed practice. Training. He was only trying to be friendly, but he needed to know things.

The fact that the guy was here with them, with others Jonah trusted, meant he should trust him too. But in Jonah's own defense, too many of his recent experiences had been spent with strangers who were dangerous. And Jonah had shot some of them.

"I was with Henry," he said. "He saved me from *them*. The Draw. I heard you got taken by them too."

"I did."

"I was against their ways."

“I was too.”

He nodded. A brief one acknowledging they’d experienced the same danger and lived through it. It didn’t need to be discussed any further.

He noticed Jonah watch the cigarette as he flicked its ashes. “You want one?”

“No thanks. I quit. Don’t want to get addicted again.”

“The more things go bad, the more I need a smoke.”

“Used to be the same for me. And exactly why I don’t keep them around.” Jonah extended a hand. “I’m Jonah.”

He stuck the butt between his lips. “Myers.” Myers squinted as smoke rose up in front of his face while shaking Jonah’s hand. “I want to quit, too. It’d be nice. Except I discovered a bunker full of them a few years back.”

“That’d definitely make it more difficult to quit for me too. I guess I always avoided where I knew they would be. Or suspected where they’d be. I never took them along when I found them while out searching for supplies. If I did, I’d end up smoking them.”

“Wish I was as smart. How’d you quit?”

“I just did. It was difficult for the first year or so but it gets easier. I find it best not to have them around. Or even nearby.”

“Maybe I’ll do the same. After this pack. But you know how that goes?”

“I do. Nice to meet you.”

“You too, Jonah.”

Jonah was reminded how moments hardly ever remained the same, everything going well and happy faces. Everyone seemed at ease, the peaks during life.

But valleys, times of struggle, despair, and worse, followed no matter how well things seemed.

Salgado crossed his path carrying a crate of supplies. “Stay motivated,” he whispered.

“What are you, my conscience? You said you’d keep an eye on things.”

“Your woman’s a general, dude! She’s got everybody doing something.” Salgado laughed. “I can multitask. We’re good. Excuse me.” Myers took a step over, and Salgado set the crate in the back of the pickup bed. “And I’m lucky too! For everyone, you’ll see.”

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CHAPTER 11

"We're good to go," Donnelly said.

Jonah nodded, and then noticed Sven's intensity. "What's on your mind?"

"A concern. Concerns," Sven said. "Everything Molters are now capable of. How they're evolving."

"How quickly they're doing it in such a short period of time," Jonah said. "Yeah."

"Especially Molters versus Behemoths," Donnelly said.

"Yeah, man, *sh*—stuff's crazy," Salgado said.

An unplanned break, Bernard slowed and caught his breath. Along with Henry, who set down an ammo crate.

"With the weather warming up, they're definitely not going to be so sluggish anymore," Salgado said.

"You call the firing line sluggish?" Jonah said.

Salgado shrugged. "They're different during the summertime is all I'm saying."

"True."

"We've got so much firepower, nobody here has to fear Molters or Behemoths," Jacobs said.

Jacobs was a natural rifleman. The thought occurred to Jonah as it did the day he first met him. Along with meeting Donnelly and Salgado.

Jacobs was holding his automatic rifle close to his chest at an angle. Those who were ex-military were used to working with a weapon hanging off them.

Jonah hoped he was wrong to continue to feel so uneasy, but Jacobs was correct in his assessment of the arsenal. There was a weapon of choice for everyone. Mostly automatic rifles, as much of the ammo available was for that weapon system.

The rest of the weapons to consider taking along consisted of assault rifles, pistols, semiautomatic and revolvers, shotguns, semiautomatic and pump-action, bolt-action rifles, and semiautomatic sniper rifles.

For explosives, there were grenades, pineapple and incendiary, grenade launchers, fully automatic and single shot, mines, and rocket launchers.

And then there was an SAR on a gunner's hatch.

Except for all the ammo, canned food, MREs, and water, the bulk of everything Jonah rigorously spent time acquiring would need to be left behind. Including what remained at burial sites they didn't have time to dig up.

For the necessities, it was deciding which was best, like choosing flashlights over lanterns—for practical reasons.

As for weapons, it was rifles over shotguns, since they did not plan on any close-quarters fighting. If they did engage Molters, they planned on doing it

from a distance.

But because of the known fact, especially for soldiers like Jonah, if something can go wrong, it will go wrong, he still packed a few shotguns along with extra weapon systems of preference.

For him, he was always prepared for a close-quarters attack because he needed to be, and although he'd used a shotgun to clear out Molter nests in the past, now he preferred a pistol.

With the muscular necks of Molters so wide, practically center mass in terms of width, especially the older ones, he'd gotten quite good at throat shots.

Jonah had spent a lot of time and energy, working up a sweat—even when it was winter—in order to make all of what was in their possession available over the years.

Overkill was best for survival, but they couldn't take everything he'd searched out, collected, and buried. Not in a day.

As far as food was concerned, what they were definitely bringing along was the meat of any recent kills. No sense in wasting good meat. And no choice but to take along other essentials, like for hygiene. But there was a finite amount of room in the six vehicles.

There was an ulterior motive by leaving some burial sites undisturbed. It was possible the weapons would be needed for reasons Jonah couldn't foresee today.

Weapons broke, were lost, or the people who wielded them got themselves killed. Because they possessed everything needed—and more—for the mission north, Jonah would leave some of everything behind.

For a backup plan. A mission he hoped never to implement.

"Wait until you guys see what else I got."

Jonah crouched down in the cellar, located, and then hefted up his prized weapon. He duck-walked it out before standing and lifting it upward.

"There's a reason Doreen refers to the cellar as the armory."

Salgado was staring at the selection of the arsenal to be chosen from for loading. And then he took great interest in the fully automatic grenade launcher Jonah carefully set down in front of him.

"Ooh, *mamacita*, now we're talking, homie. Holy *sh*—heck . . . Holy heck, man. That's capable of a lot of boom."

"Thanks," Jonah said proudly.

"It was my weapon system, bro. Before all this BS."

It didn't surprise Jonah that Salgado was motivated by the weapon system. Salgado was the grenadier when hunting down the Behemoth before Jonah went to Henrytown when they'd first met.

"I know it doesn't matter how many bullets we have against so many teeth

and claws, but with this? It's a game changer," Salgado said. "You got grenade belts?"

"What do you think? It's all for you," Jonah said. "You need NVGs?"

"Nah, I got my own."

"OK. Help me mount it on one of the UVs before we drive out?"

"Sure will. With me behind it, I'll fricking protect everyone. Thanks, brother."

"You got it."

Jonah looked to the cabin. The ladies were still inside finishing up packing. Wherever Heike went, Patty followed, as if Heike were the one who was older. Jonah was sure it was nice for both of them to be around each other, both being young.

And wherever Doreen went, those young ears followed, so it was best to discuss dangerous matters when they weren't around.

If there was anyone who would understand, it was Henry, Jonah thought. Searching for survivors was how Jonah had first gotten to know him. When Jonah helped Henry—and Doreen—to go and attempt to find the missing folks of Henrytown.

"Henry," Jonah said, "I think we should stop at Archard's old camp, Fort Perry." Henry's expression changed. "You've been there?"

"No. I heard of it. Heard what was done there."

"It wasn't just the Draw going on," Jonah assured. "I saw children. Families. Maybe not blood, but together and looking after one another."

"You believe they're still there?"

"I don't know. But I want to. I need to. No matter what we went through, it's the right thing to do. I'm tired of looking the other way."

"Can't we contact them? They surely have radios."

"I was a prisoner so I could only guess the frequency. Frequencies."

The others listened and Jonah was sure they would throw in an idea if it came to them.

Jonah thought back to how much time he'd spent listening to radios needing winding to function. Hoping for contact from strangers. He didn't know how dangerous it was to think that way. Not everyone turned out to be like the good folks from Henrytown.

"We must stop there before pressing on," Jonah said. "I already have too many regrets."

Henry gave a knowing nod. "To limit regrets is often the best choice. But is it wise now?"

"At least we'll know we aren't abandoning people who might need our help."

Henry thought it over. "We will have plenty of weapons."

"For sure," Salgado said.

"Enough to handle anything coming our way," Henry said. "And we'll be driving."

Henry seemed to be thinking out loud. Jonah respected that he wasn't committing to anything quickly, not without mentally chewing it over first. As he did before giving Jonah permission to propose to his daughter. Henry was acting like a father to all of them.

"We'll have multiple weapon systems at hand. Including a fully automatic grenade launcher. And an S-A-R within my reach," Jonah said. "It means going where we please. But before we *all* go there, if at all, I'd like to go ahead. If there's trouble, I'll warn everyone off by radio."

"No chance my daughter is about to allow it."

"My idea, my risk."

"Although true, all this isn't entirely your burden. Not anymore. Time to share the burden. Time to delegate." Jonah was about to object further, when Henry said, "If everyone voted, who do you think they would say is the leader?"

Jonah laughed. He couldn't help it, remembering he'd asked Henry the same question once, at Henrytown.

"Understood?"

"Yes, sir."

It was decided. Jonah would lead them. Which indeed meant delegating.

Salgado raised his eyebrows twice, getting Jonah's attention, and nodding toward Myers. "Myers, you know Fort Perry, right?"

Myers was taking a breather. "Yeah."

"There you go."

Jonah nodded. "You good with driving ahead before we arrive?"

"Of course," Myers said.

"You see anything looking wrong, you grab your mic and let us know."

"OK."

Giving Myers a mission was a way to give him ownership of the mission north, to make him feel like he belonged, and Salgado had spied the opportunity before Jonah.

Being the leader now, Jonah appreciated it.

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CHAPTER 12

Salgado and Jonah secured the fully automatic grenade launcher to the gunner's hatch of the UV—with some muscle from Nico.

Jonah fed the machete and sheath through his belt and secured it on his hip. The machete was another of his replacements. A machete would be the perfect weapon in case he ran out of bullets in the near future.

With Donnelly, Jacobs, and Salgado, Jonah could take advantage of years of military training and experience. Fall into an attack formation as they did when hunting down the Behemoth together near Henrytown. If necessary.

Then there were the others, too. Nico, Philip, and Myers, who he was unfamiliar with in terms of their skills, because he hadn't fought with them side by side.

Except for Nico and Philip. Briefly at the firing line before he knew who was who. Or not at all, like Myers.

Still, his experience told him that with all their combined experience, this team was ideal for the mission north and perhaps the best in the world. Then there was Sven and Bernard.

Sven was a doctor, and Bernard was a cook, but both men were skilled drivers. Jonah remembered just how well from Henrytown, while hunting down Behemoths. And that was before there was snow on the ground.

The snow had melted, so think how they could handle the road now?

Aside from their reliable driving skills, they were also reliable mechanics. And they'd grown up in this country.

Jonah approached Bernard and Sven and leaned in like he was about to tell them a secret. "You two be ready to drive."

Both men gave a close-lipped smile. Bashful, as if their driving skills were classified.

"Always," Sven said.

After doing some last-minute checks, Salgado slid off the top of the UV. "Definitely bringing siphoning necessities. A vehicle might not go no more for who the heck knows why. Know what I'm saying?"

Jonah cocked his head. "Secrets."

"What's your problem? I wasn't always one of the good guys."

Heike jumped off the porch, her boots splatting in the mud, followed by Patty who rolled her eyes.

Doreen closed the door to the cabin behind her. She safely hefted the rocket launcher, the last of what they were taking along with them.

It had been stored behind the door next to the coat rack for so long it'd

become scenery, so she'd placed it there again in the last few hours.

Doreen was emotional as she held the destructive one-shot, fire-and-forget weapon and turned toward the cabin, staring at it for what was probably the last time.

Jonah felt the same way, remembering everything they'd been through . . .

Destroying Behemoth cocoons.

The Molters he killed nearby.

The man who'd nearly kicked down the door before Doreen shot him.

The rampaging Behemoth almost crashing into the cabin. Before Jonah shot it to death with his rifle.

Except many of their memories were also happy ones.

Which direction hadn't he gone out for a hunt? And how many times with Heike going along?

The picnic table and what it meant.

The wood he'd chopped they would never burn.

Jonah's jogging route.

Hauling in a holiday tree.

The tears.

The laughter.

All the hugs and kisses and love between him and Doreen.

And seriously, how many times had they used the outhouse? How many times were the ladies grumpy because one of them needed to go in the middle of the night and Jonah stifling a chuckle thinking it funny?

For a while, Jonah considered wiring the cabin to explode, in case a backup plan needed a backup plan. But he'd changed his mind. The cabin didn't belong to them. And he'd never planned on them to live there permanently.

And for some reason, Jonah really liked the idea of someone else finding the cabin and living in it one day. Because he knew it wasn't their home. Not anymore. Someone else living there, or a family, it would be like Jonah and his people still lived there.

The thought didn't make much sense but over the years, it had occurred to him consistently. He'd learned not to ignore the repetitious thoughts of the subconscious.

They'd found the key to the door of the cabin easily upon their arrival, even though Henry hadn't even mentioned it when he'd sent them here.

Possibly someone had the same idea as Jonah did now—Jonah liked to think so—so it was fitting they did the same. The key was left in the doorknob of the lone door leading into the cabin, as it was when they'd arrived there.

Jonah also left the lock on the cellar door. Slightly open and with the key in it too. He hoped someone would one day think of the cabin as a home as much as they had.

Jonah glanced at Doreen and saw the same emotions he was feeling. "I know."

She smiled at him, and for a few seconds everyone stood around.

"We're about to get on the road," Jonah said. "Anybody got anything?"

"Along the way," Sven said, addressing everyone, "if anyone isn't feeling well, please let me know."

"You all heard him," Jonah said. "If we need to, we'll stop. Where it's safe, and secure the temporary perimeter. Anybody else?"

"If you need to, and you can't make a shot, you let *me* know," Donnelly said.

"And if you need to make something disappear, you let *me* know," Salgado said.

The laughter was a welcome sound and suited the end of their time at the cabin.

"That reminds me, keep earplugs in your ears, or on hand," Jonah said. "I found thousands of them over the years, so don't worry about wasting them."

Jonah wasn't sure why, but he was delaying the inevitable for a while longer. Under the circumstances, by there not being any foreseeable danger, it was allowable.

But eventually, it was time.

"Ready?"

Doreen nodded and wiped at her wet cheeks.

"All right," Jonah said. "Time to leave."

Jonah waited until every vehicle started up and everyone was inside a vehicle. He wanted to be the last to enter a vehicle and was waiting on Doreen.

Doreen looked to him, and before she got inside the pickup truck where Henry was behind the wheel, she kissed two fingers and pointed them at the cabin, their home since Henrytown. *"Tschüss."*

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CHAPTER 13

For those who wanted to nap in vehicles before dawn, it was allowed. It was possible to take advantage of Jonah's control of the immediate territory. He'd been confident they'd be able to.

So far, the day was uneventful. In the best way possible, because it meant there wasn't a need for shooting.

But Jonah couldn't ignore the part of his inner radar sensing when a bad thing was going to happen. Maybe even very bad *things* were on the horizon. With the weather creeping toward summer, inevitably they would encounter more Molters than ever before.

Looking over the terrain before them, it didn't seem anything dangerous would happen any time soon. Or not at all. The sun blanketed green trees on both sides of the road and cast a warm, pinkish hue over the snowy mountains beyond.

His hands began to sweat. He was really going to do this.

Seeing no obstacles—at least for enough time necessary—Jonah crouched down into the cab of the UV from the gunner's hatch, sat, leaned forward and grabbed the mic.

Jonah hesitated . . .

He thumbed the mic. "Doreen, do you copy?"

He waited.

"What is it, Jonah?"

Jonah visualized her. "I have something to ask you."

Philip shifted his view from the driver's seat to see Jonah in the reflection of the rearview mirror. Sven patted him on the shoulder.

"Potty break," Henry radioed.

The convoy parked in the middle of the road. Engines idling. Jonah got out of the lead vehicle, leaving the door open and walked south to the truck. Henry was grinning from the driver's seat, and Jonah knocked on the passenger window.

Doreen rolled the window down. "You could have asked me whatever over the radio."

"Not for this." Butterflies flew around in Jonah's stomach. "Will you step out please?"

Doreen smiled and the corner of her mouth wavered. She must have sensed his excitement. "Is something wrong?"

"Not at all."

Others, except for drivers, exited vehicles too. Either to stretch or do as Henry suggested; relieve themselves out of sight. Jonah pointed to his eyes and then outward.

From the rear vehicle's gunner's hatch, while behind the fully automatic

grenade launcher, Salgado nodded.

Jonah got down on one knee, and Doreen gasped. He took her hand, gazing up. “Doreen, you are the love of my life, will you marry me?”

Doreen’s chin quivered, glancing quickly at Heike and Henry, who nodded. She flattened her hand against her chest.

“Yes.” She swallowed thick emotion. “Yes, Jonah. Yes!”

Jonah rose up, closed his eyes, and kissed her. As always for those brief moments, the world was a wonderful place with zero danger or worry, only happiness.

“Way to go, Jonah!” Heike said.

Patty was next to her on the bench seat and tapped her on the shoulder. “Don’t you mean dad?”

Heike blushed and shrugged. Then she nodded. It was Jonah’s turn to get emotional as the people before him became his new family: fiancé, stepdaughter, and father-in-law.

“Homie!” Salgado yelled from the gunner’s hatch. “I mean, congratulations, and this is punching us all right in the feelings, but do we really have time for this? Maybe we can do this part on the road?”

“I’m not getting married over the radio, Salgado!” Doreen said.

“OK, OK. But we stay too long and they’re going to eat us up like wedding cakes. I’ve got a lot of cousins and I’ve been to a lot of weddings so I know what I’m talking about!”

Jacobs, Donnelly, Sven, and Bernard stood guard. Nico and Philip were guarding the front of the convoy but within hearing distance. Patty and Heike remained seated on the bench seat of the truck with the door open.

Salgado was probably right, Jonah thought, but how often did they get to do normal things these days, especially celebrate?

Maybe not exactly normal. Jonah couldn’t recall ever seeing a wedding when all of the groomsmen were armed.

Even though Jonah noticed the nervousness on Henry’s face after Jonah asked him to marry them now, Henry couldn’t be happier.

“I, we, want you to be the one,” Doreen said.

“I don’t even know the words,” Henry said.

“You know the last words, right?” Salgado shouted.

Jonah laughed and shook his head at him.

“All right, all right,” Salgado said. “You’re lucky you all got me pinned behind this weapon.”

“I suppose I do,” Henry said.

“No, that’s what we say, Henry,” Jonah said.

“Ha!”

“Make something up.”

“Say whatever comes to mind,” Doreen said.

Henry bumbled along, talking about how much Heike reminded him of her mom when she was her age, and explaining how confusing it was how quickly kids grew up, because of how it seemed to him Doreen was born yesterday.

And then Henry said what has been said uncountable times before. A sapling of happiness planted for any two getting married. What would grow them into what would be the rest of their lives.

“I now pronounce you man and wife. You may kiss the bride.”

Jonah and Doreen kissed as man and wife for the first time. Doreen’s passion sent him signals his inner radar didn’t recognize, radiations of emotions women possessed when they were truly happy.

A strong bond strengthened even more in the moment. In ways only the universe understood. Once the kiss ended and Doreen opened her beautiful eyes to look into his, Jonah felt something change between them.

Doreen knew Jonah had wanted her to be his wife. And Doreen had accepted Jonah to be her husband. Getting married meant choosing.

What a wonderful choice for both of us.

Doreen would be his woman for the rest of his life, and Jonah would be her man until his last breath.

Doreen didn’t need to ask if Jonah had asked Henry’s permission to marry her. She knew he’d done it because he’d said he would.

“I love you,” Jonah said.

“I love you, too,” Doreen said.

Jonah looked to Henry, who grinned, and nodded with fatherly approval.

“Yay!” Heike said.

“Congratulations!” Salgado shouted. “I want to be your best man!”

Jonah cupped a hand to the side of his mouth. “We’re already married!”

“You can be his best man, Salgado!”

“Thanks, Doreen!”

“Wait a second,” Jonah said, “isn’t it supposed to be my decision?”

Doreen shrugged and kissed him again. This time they hugged, and as they did there was applause.

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CHAPTER 14

"Well, shit."

"You sure said it."

Jonah snickered.

"No way I can do my necessities with it down there."

"You think *I* can? I'd have to watch it happen. At least you'd have to imagine it. I'll go right on it. It's inhumane or something."

Doreen tittered.

"Where's our brave little hunter when we need her?"

"Inside the cabin where I wish we were."

"Unfortunately, we have to do something about this."

"It sure is hideous."

"Like all of them."

"Good thing I heard it thrashing around."

"I know. I'm glad you came and got me. They can open doors so I guess it was eventual they'd figure out the latches on the outhouse."

"Then it must have lifted the lid and . . . why would it go down there? None of them ever did it before."

"None ever have."

"Even though we were prepared for it to happen, it's weird."

"Son of a bitch."

Doreen laughed. Both of them crowded inside the space of the outhouse designed for one and peeked over the bowl.

A Molter stared up at them, standing in years of waste that sloshed up to its chest. Its tooth-filled jaws worked up and down and its bulbous eyes flicked all over as it tried to figure out a way to escape.

"What the hell drew it down there? It really doesn't make any sense. I don't mind getting dirty but not like this."

"So, the mighty Jonah doesn't like to deal with number one and number two?"

"Real funny."

"It is to me."

"Number two. My Achilles heel."

"Hey, it's ours."

"It's still number two."

"You could shoot it from here and then leave it."

"Would you really be able to forget it's beneath you every time you sit down?"

"Definitely not."

"Me either. This is gonna be messy. I'm really gonna need a bath after this one."

"You're actually going to climb down there?"

"I have a choice?"

"How will I get you back out?"

"You'll have to pull me out."

Salgado's voice over the radio pulled Jonah out of the memory. Dangerous times, and it was when Doreen was pregnant. Before miscarrying. Jonah decided against climbing down into the outhouse.

Instead, they'd lowered a two by four at the end of a rope into its depths. Jonah taped a baseball glove to his forearm. Doreen aimed Jonah's 9mm pistol, while Jonah pulled the rope with gloved hands.

The Molter clawed onto anything, so of course it held on. When it was nearly to the top, below the toilet lid, Jonah offered the baseball glove. The fearsome creature happily bit into the leather.

Doreen, quickly and as precisely as she could, handed over his 9mm. As Jonah hauled the snarling and thrashing Molter out of the outhouse, he shot it in the head.

The Molter in the outhouse was one of the funnier things happening to them while living at the cabin. It already seemed so long ago.

What did Salgado say?

Jonah turned around in the gunner's hatch as he listened to the radio chatter beneath him.

". . . and she was like, why you looking at my booty? And I was like, because I look at booties. Then she was like—"

Jonah made a swiping motion at the front of his neck and dropped back into the UV, reaching forward for the mic, thumbing it. "Remember, young ears."

"Shoot. Sorry. Your wedding and all. I just miss my wife. Even though she's gone."

How many experiences did Salgado have with *his* wife similar to the one Jonah was thinking about having with Doreen?

How many of the men were married and lost their wives too, like Salgado? There is never enough time spent with a loved one. It isn't quantity. It's quality. Jonah was about to say so but changed his mind.

Instead, he simply said, "I'm sorry, man."

Jonah couldn't imagine life without Doreen.

"Me too. Thanks," Salgado radioed. *"Easy for my thoughts to get carried away up here. Boring right now."*

Jonah spotted an opportunity. "Better than the alternative."

Nothing better for a soldier—even a former one—than a mission to keep their mind occupied. Jonah knew the lesson all too well.

"True. True."

“Keep your eyes open.”
“Shoot, dude. I can talk and shoot with my eyes closed.”
“Don’t prove it.”
Salgado laughed over the radio before it went silent.

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CHAPTER 15

There were vehicles, two of them. Pickup trucks. They were practically replicas of the ones appearing when Jonah was abducted on the road by Perry and the others who enforced the Draw.

They must have belonged to the intruders who got near the cabin. The men Jonah and Doreen—but also a Behemoth—had killed.

Jonah was currently riding in the back seat of the lead UV. He was resting his legs on purpose. Taking advantage of the down time. He'd be standing in the gunner's hatch later.

Reading minds, Jonah thumbed the radio mic. "I imagine we'll see a lot of things of interest or potential use, but we can't stop for everything."

"Yeah, just for weddings," Salgado radioed.

Laughter filled the lead UV. Sven was next to Jonah, Philip was driving, and no one was in the passenger seat. Jonah imagined there was laughter in the other vehicles as well.

He thumbed the mic. "When it is necessary to stop, we will."

At the moment he was taking advantage of his vigilance of going through his self-appointed missions. Especially the ones atop the ridges to eliminate cocoons. Sitting was the payoff. He could only guess how many cocoons he'd destroyed with a rifle. He'd never counted.

But they'd definitely put a dent in the local Behemoth population. Enough to allow the—presently—five-vehicle convoy to be unobstructed. For now. And safe for now was good enough.

Jonah thumbed the mic. "I'm not sure how far the protection of my clearing will go, but I'm ready to stand up and man the S-A-R whenever it's necessary. Still, keep eyes open for Molters. And also Behemoths. And barrels pointed."

"Behemoths haven't been seen much. Saw more at the firing line than I did in the last year," Salgado radioed. *"Good thing too. Behemoths shed those Infector bastards."*

The radios stayed on in every vehicle and on the same frequency. Myers had driven the UV ahead and checked in recently. He'd nearly arrived at Fort Perry, and they would join him shortly.

Convenient to have access to military radios again, Jonah thought.

There was even a radio set up on the dashboard in the backup truck from the cabin Henry drove. Jonah could imagine how scrunched it was on the bench seat with Heike, Patty, and Doreen alongside him.

It crossed Jonah's mind to offer up the empty passenger seat. But if anything happened, the lead vehicle would encounter it first. Jonah wanted everyone else protected as best as possible. He could decide differently whenever. Middle vehicles of a convoy were safer than the lead one.

The vehicles without military radios were the two extra pickup trucks transporting the newcomers. Nico drove one, and Bernard the other. They both drove alone as the trucks were fully loaded from the cabs to beds.

The rear UV was driven by Donnelly. Jacobs was in the passenger seat, and Salgado was in the back seat. Salgado was as ready to rise up into its gunner's hatch as Jonah. It was the one with the fully automatic grenade launcher attached at the gunner's hatch.

"Probably not many Behemoths because they're being hunted. By Molters. Then whatever the heck is going on with them. Everything's so different now. I bet there's some of everything we know of, out there somewhere."

Jonah thumbed the mic. "You didn't want to talk about any of this stuff at the dig site and now you won't shut up about it."

"Hey man, I change my mind all the time, don't you know? We gotta talk about something."

Sven looked to be chewing on multiple thoughts.

"Speaking of which, I'm going to chat with Sven for a while."

"Understood."

Jonah gave Sven a slight sock to the shoulder. "What's up?"

"Because of changes, it seems obvious the Behemoth came first before the Molter. Maybe it is natural for the Molters to feed on the Behemoths when it becomes useless and cannot produce Infectors."

"I hate that Molters are independent now. At least before, there was some predictability."

"Some of them are still dependent. But both are predators in their own right."

"Molters are more and more self-sustaining, each with their own individual hunting drive and instincts. With the current lifecycle of the Behemoths, it's likely Molters are birthing themselves now, right?"

"Sounds correct."

"If they continue to grow as they feed instead of cocooning to become food, how big can Molters get?"

"I haven't seen any taller than average men. Philip, you look like you have something to add?"

"I've seen lots of things I don't understand," Philip said. "Like why don't they feed on each other? I mean they feed on Behemoths now, right?"

"It must go against their instincts."

"Maybe. But for how long? Let's say they hunted humans to extinction. Then what?"

"Perhaps do exactly what you're inferring."

"Hopefully we'll never know. Anyway, what you were saying before, once I saw one, it must have been at least two or three feet taller than the others. But I couldn't be sure."

"Because they're typically hunched?"

"Exactly."

"I do believe it's possible. And I do believe you did see something abnormal, Philip."

"Why? I mean, I know you believe me, but how was it possible?"

"Because I believe I've also seen things not always known. Not always for sure. It's unbelievable how fast they've evolved. Although they showed a difference in behavior at Henrytown, surely it wasn't the catalyst. Even though, at times I was afraid it was."

"Of course Molter behavior was affected by Henrytown. How could it not be?" Jonah said. "We hunted down and destroyed Behemoths already born. Any Molters linked to them were on their own from then on. To survive is the simplest of choices, even for animals. But they grouped together to hunt as a pack. Packs."

Jonah saw the worry on Sven's face. But Jonah wasn't done with his hypothesis.

"I don't mean what we did changed the species, but the local behavior definitely was altered because of Henrytown. As a species, Molters already were changing. Or at least it's been possible to evolve. What went on in one town, couldn't have changed the behavior of an entire species worldwide. But with so many changes here, who knows what's going on in the rest of the world?"

"The Infector bombs are proof of their evolution," Sven stated with conviction. "At Henrytown, we believed our strategy to deter them using their dead was a defense. In all reality, it may have made everything much, much worse."

"How could we have known?"

The conversation drove the convoy closer to their first destination. As each kilometer ticked away, Jonah felt more uncertain.

"We do what we humans do," Sven said.

"Which is?" Philip asked.

"Our best during the time we're living."

"It's all anyone can ever do," Jonah agreed. "Henrytown was safe. Even I felt it and I was there for a few weeks. There could be other towns like it. Communities surviving, and discovering new ways to defend themselves."

Sven grimaced. "Where human sacrifice isn't required."

"Fucking sickos," Philip said. "Sick bastards."

"I don't know what it could be or where, but we might encounter trustworthy people and learn from them during the drive north," Jonah said.

"I respect your optimism, American," Sven said.

"Sometimes it's all I've got."

The drive was surprisingly smooth. The idea of the world ending made it seem as though everything else would degrade along with it, especially roads,

but human ingenuity kept up with end of the world conditions.

Unless there had been an earthquake or extreme weather or rough years passed, roads remained intact. It seemed they would remain that way for at least a few more years. Long enough for them to reach the north.

By how fast they were driving, they'd arrive in no time at all.

Sven stared out the box-shaped window of the UV while holding a loaded revolver on his lap. "In terms of their evolution, I would say Molters are pliable. I wonder what the species will look like, how they will be, at the end of their evolution."

"If it ever ends," Jonah said.

"Humans have been evolving since their introduction on this planet. Taller, bigger, stronger, faster, smarter. Maybe even Molters will become self-aware in the future."

"Nothing seems impossible these days. But they'll definitely reach their potential, whatever it is, because most, maybe even all of them, aren't becoming food for Behemoths anymore."

"I've often wondered what happens when a Behemoth has fed on all of the Molters serving it."

"I've wondered myself. The fact there's so few Behemoths seems flawed."

"Or predetermined," Philip chimed in again from the driver's seat.

"I agree," Sven said, "but often strengths are confused with flaws, especially in nature. In this case, this flaw or strength has propelled their evolution. Molters, not Behemoths. The new strain of Molter is like a child who no longer needs their parents to watch over them. They're all grown up."

The comparison was unnerving, Jonah thought. But true.

"At first, we saw Molters and Behemoths at night. Likely the Molters hunted nocturnally because of their relationship to the Behemoths. Because the new strain doesn't cocoon to become food anymore and are independent, I suspect the nocturnal hunting patterns tied to the Behemoths were severed. It is why they hunt day or night."

"Why were they nocturnal to begin with?" Philip asked.

"It was the first stage of the Molting," Jonah said. "Sven and I discussed it at Henrytown. Humans sleep during the night and it's natural for prey to hunt when their prey is vulnerable. It made sense when everything began, but not so much anymore. Now the Molters don't have to be so stealthy."

"Is it because people travel day and night?" Philip questioned.

"Possibly," Jonah said. "But I think it has to do with how many of them there are now."

"A lot of uncertainties," Philip said.

"Always," Sven said.

"Except for one thing," Jonah said. "We are headed north."

"Yes, we are," Sven said.

Philip's gloved grip tightened on the steering wheel. Strict attention turned back to the road. Jonah sensed how much of a team they all already were. It

was astonishing how quickly it could occur, especially with some of them being prior service.

But not all of them were former soldiers. The bond was because they were all human, which already made them a solid team against the enemy.

Jonah suspected there were other teams out there. He hoped to learn about them one day, even if they were already gone.

Or even better, one day meet them and hear their stories firsthand.

"I agree about what you mentioned, Jonah. With so many, they can attack in force because of their sheer numbers," Sven said. "As fast as they've evolved, so has their behavior. There are some who think Molters are a necessary plague to cleanse the earth of human overpopulation."

"Yeah, I think I heard that somewhere before," Philip said.

Jonah had. From Frox, the man who assumed control over the Draw, and who Jonah had shot to death at the firing line.

Even though Jonah enjoyed hypothesizing, especially with someone as curious as he was about everything, as Sven was, and also Philip who contributed his own experiences to the discussion, Jonah was anxious for a time of normalcy.

He wanted to be around people he chose to be with, not forced to out of desperation. Also be in a healthy family environment, where the most stressful decision of the day was what to have for dinner. And where to dine.

Except he knew that way of living was still a long way off. There was a lot of road in between here and there.

Jonah wouldn't be rude. He would continue to hear everyone out. But suddenly, he was as sick of talking about the Molting as Salgado was at the dig site. He didn't want to talk about it anymore either.

He'd had his fill as if he'd eaten too much and was about to be sick. Once Jonah moved his family to the next place they lived, he hoped never to talk about the Molting again. He wanted it to be over.

Sensing it was nowhere near being over made him want to get it over with even faster. One way was to destroy all the bloodsucking creatures if they blocked their path. Except they'd encountered none so far. It was a positive, but also unexpected.

No matter his understanding and appreciation of his own clearing missions.

But he was looking forward to the next step and who might be at Fort Perry. Maybe things would go well there? He was ready for them not to. He would ensure everyone else was as prepared. Treat them like they weren't prepared already.

So he grabbed the radio mic, redundancy be damned. "Attention, everyone. Stagger the vehicles when you park. Ten meters at least."

Although the purpose of leaving space between parked vehicles was a tactic to avoid getting blown up at once during a typical war when explosives were a threat, they were dealing with another type of bomb.

An Infector bomb, a Molter capable of discharging smaller creatures.

“And when we exit vehicles, leave doors unlocked. Windows down. Keys in ignitions.”

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CHAPTER 16

If as many Molters that had been at the firing line had headed this way already, Fort Perry would have been flattened. Fortunately, it hadn't happened. Giving them time.

The structure still impressed. Jonah felt bad for having to kill its architect. But Perry shouldn't have tangled with him at all.

Perry's creation was entrenched in fog. It looked to be abandoned as the five-vehicle convoy—three pickup trucks in the middle of two UVs—drove the road through the stump forest leading to it.

Once parked, everyone got out of the vehicles. Except for Heike and Patty, who Doreen told to remain in the truck. Sven decided to remain in his seat but with the door open.

The UV Myers had driven was parked and still packed to the gills. Myers was nowhere in sight.

They milled about in front of the closed gate. Surely it was secured from the inside. Anxiously, they looked for any signs of life, peering upward.

"No sign of him," Henry said.

No one needed a command to keep their distance. The fort was completely silent. It seemed nothing within stirred.

Mist swirled against the base of the fifty-foot trees with sharpened tips holding the fort together, and high-pitched wind explored the forest surrounding them.

There was plenty of dirt in sight but there were no grave mounds. It could mean everyone left on their own accord. Or the inhabitants of the fort had all molted.

Jonah remembered thinking that Molters discarded their burial behavior, instinct signaling to them they were unstoppable. Jonah kept it to himself.

"I'm not too crazy about this lack of visibility," Salgado said.

"None of us are," Jonah said.

Salgado cupped a hand to the side of his mouth but held back a yell. "Myers?" He waited. "Maybe he's pissing."

"He should be waiting on us." Jonah peered upward. "People might be in there."

"Or something else," Donnelly said.

Nico, Philip, and Jacobs mirrored Donnelly's posture with weapons held at the ready. Even Bernard was nervous. Jonah noticed his weapon hand trembled.

"I get it, guys," Jonah said to them. "But there were kids."

"Yeah, but since then everyone must have run off or got killed," Salgado said. "This ain't good, man."

"There should be guards up there at least threatening us, right?" Henry

said. “I don’t see anybody.”

“And what are we going to do to find out? Breach the walls?” Salgado said. “If Behemoths can’t, how the heck can we?”

“Salgado, walk the fort,” Jonah said.

Salgado brought his automatic rifle up at the ready. “No problem.”

“Donnelly, will you back him up?”

Donnelly glanced at Jonah. For a split second he might question or even object to the command.

But someone needed to be in charge, and Jonah was in no mood to vote. And if anyone did challenge him, they would have to deal with Henry.

“Yeah, man,” Salgado said to Donnelly. “Help me out.”

Jonah appreciated the assist. And Jonah didn’t have to remind the rest of them to keep weapons ready. But he did address one aspect.

“Keep fingers off triggers. We don’t need anyone accidentally getting shot. Or shooting themselves in the foot.”

“If the people didn’t decide to leave, Molters must have gotten inside the fort,” Doreen said. “Why else would there be no one in sight?”

“How though?” Henry said. “I don’t see any damage from entry.”

Jonah looked above at the platform, where guards had walked when he was taken there against his will. There was no one up there now. It didn’t make any sense.

Unless . . .

“They’re returning,” Bernard said.

Salgado and Donnelly hustled back. Jonah was about to ask why they’d returned so quickly but he noticed Salgado’s expression. He shook his head at him.

Jonah walked up to him and leaned in.

“At least two,” Salgado whispered. “Probably more.”

Donnelly held his automatic rifle at an angle against his chest. “There’s no one here to save, Jonah. Not anymore. So no longer a reason to stay.”

Jonah nodded. “No choice but to drive on. Jacobs?” Jonah pointed. “I want you driving the . . .” Referring to the UV as Myers’s UV no longer applied. “the UV.”

“All right,” Jacobs said.

Jonah’s command to Jacobs allowed the others to know Myers was dead. Jonah took a step away from the gate, but his boot *squished*.

Looking down, he’d stepped into a large flesh pile. The feeling—even through a boot—reminded him of stepping on a sea creature while calf deep in the ocean.

Squinting, he felt revulsion sting the bottom of his stomach, and it made him want to heave. The person who molted must have been obese?

Suddenly, the Earth felt even more foreign, alien, as if a different planet entirely. One where the human race didn’t have a place, yet humans remained. Now it belonged to another life form. Things aggressively replacing humans.

If mankind doesn't belong on Earth, then where do we go?

He couldn't make out the flesh pile clearly. It was overly bloody, as if a very tall and heavy man simply unzipped his skin and took it off.

Henry eyed it. "Is that a . . ."

"Yes," Jonah said without taking his eyes off it. "No flies."

Or flies already fed on other flesh piles, laid their eggs, and moved on to somewhere else. It meant remnants of a molting was recent.

Too soon to liquefy and vanish from sight, as was his hypothesis about what happened to the remains of the latest strain of creatures.

A piercing scream.

A fight. Near the wood line.

So high in pitch, there was no mistaking it. It was a girl. She was struggling to survive.

Jonah's view snapped to Henry's truck. There was no one inside the cab.

Not another very bad thing. Please.

"Why wasn't anyone—Heike!" Jonah yelled.

"Jonah!" Doreen was panicked. "Where is she?"

"No!" Jonah yelled.

Jonah's pistol was already in hand as he ran for the source, ready to swing the automatic rifle strapped around him into firing position if necessary.

Adrenaline coursed through him, but he couldn't run fast enough. It felt like he were trudging through a swamp.

"I told her!" Doreen shouted after him. "I told her to stay in the truck!"

Panicky faced men stared at Jonah in disbelief as he blurred past them. Sven stepped out of the UV.

"Men, get the lead out!" Jonah shouted. "Move your asses!"

They did as commanded and ran after Jonah.

Not one of them could keep pace with him, especially Henry and Bernard and Sven, who did their best to keep up with the younger men.

Molters were in a frenzy.

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CHAPTER 17

The tearing and biting and clawing amplified. It was how Jonah imagined hibernating Molters would feed on prey, after waking up and clawing their way out of a cave being so hungry. It was his worst fear to happen to a loved one.

Jonah was already devastated. And Doreen. How will she go on? How could any of them possibly continue the drive north?

Miraculously, Heike appeared, standing up after having fallen down. She was alive.

Alive!

Jonah's heart skipped a beat. Heike had been running toward the attack too but from a different direction.

Where had she been?

"Heike!" Doreen shouted in disbelief. "Oh, Heike!"

Heike ignored her mom and raised her pistol. She began methodically shooting as fast as she could. Jonah used his pistol and helped her finish the job. The others arrived and aimed, ready to fire.

But it was over already. No one else needed to shoot. The Molters had been focused on their kill. The pack of them was dead. Heike sank to her knees and wept.

Jonah caught his breath. The others did too. Sven's eyes were watery.

Jonah placed a hand on Sven's shoulder. "I'm so sorry."

Sven took off his glasses and wiped at his eyes with the back of his hand and sniffed. Then he placed his glasses back on and exhaled.

Jonah glanced at Henry, whose eyes were closed, his chin quivering. Henry rubbed at his eyes and turned away, muttering something. No doubt a thanks his granddaughter was still alive, when a moment ago they'd feared the worst.

Doreen picked the stunned Heike off the ground and held her in an embrace. Heike's legs and arms were limp like a doll's . . . until they wrapped around Doreen and she cried.

"*Shh*. It's OK. You're OK. You're alive."

"Poor Patty," Salgado said.

Jonah wanted to say: "I know." But no words came out. Heike was alive, and he was beyond thankful. But a young girl was dead.

Dead Molters lay around what was left of Patty. Heike had tried so desperately to save her friend, but it was too late.

"She wanted some privacy as she did . . . her paperwork," Heike said over Doreen's shoulder. "She was too embarrassed and wanted to be sneaky about it. It's my fault."

Doreen stroked her hair. "It was an accident."

"I told her we shouldn't go into the woods, but she said we'd be back

before anyone was the wiser. I was supposed to watch over her. I stepped away for a second. I heard something."

Something? Jonah thought. Molters. They were probably trying to separate the two girls so they could converge on one.

"It wasn't your fault," Jonah said, reassuring Heike.

Heike's eyes narrowed as she wiggled down to the ground, pushing away from her mom as she charged him. "No, it's yours! If we didn't come here, my friend would still be alive!"

"Heike!" Doreen said.

Jonah felt terrible and he wasn't sure how to respond. So, he said what anyone should. "I'm sorry."

Maybe Heike was right. Maybe Patty's death was his fault.

But maybe not.

Patty's death, anyone's death, was awful. She'd been alive just minutes ago. Pain from failure throbbed inside him everywhere. They'd recently begun the mission north and already two were dead, Myers, and now Patty.

It was completely unacceptable. But there was no going back in time to fix it. He, and they, should focus on the mission to get north.

Blame could, and often would, be endless. Rationalizing and getting over feelings often took time, and extra time was something they did not have.

Heike was angry with Jonah. She was sad. She should be. And it was understandable that she didn't like him right now. She could feel any way she wanted. And for as long as she needed.

If he were in her shoes and her age and had lost his friend, he'd probably feel the same way. Except he was so thankful Heike was alive. And even though what happened was terrible, he could still be proud of her from a distance.

Heike had handled those Molters well. Even now she was practicing weapon discipline, with the barrel of the pistol pointing down at the ground and her finger off the trigger.

Heike wiped at her cheeks with the hand not holding the weapon, looking much like her mom. "Can we bury her?"

The corpse was so bloody it was unrecognizable. Burying Patty would take time. Molters had already attacked. There was no time for it. Except they couldn't leave her like that.

"Get the e-tools."

At Jonah's command Nico, Philip, Salgado, Jacobs, Donnelly, Bernard, Sven, and Henry went for the military fold-up shovels located in the UVs.

Waste of time or not, or whether there was time for it at all, they were going to bury the young girl's body.

Heike attempted to say how she felt but all she got out was Patty's name. She

cried the rest.

Eventually she managed, “She was my good friend.”

Going north was even more important now. If that were even possible. The fact Heike considered someone to be a good friend and knew her for how long, a day? It was proof of how important it was for kids to socialize. To have friends. So they could grow up normally.

It wasn’t just what kids wanted, it was what they needed, and needing to be around other kids the same age was as important to them as adults being in romantic relationships.

Jonah had taken it for granted when he was young, because being normal wasn’t out of the ordinary. For young people these days, normalcy was rare.

His stepdaughter remaining safe and having the opportunity to live a normal life was as important a mission as all of them to reach a destination. Jonah would ensure both missions were accomplished, or die trying.

The burial over, Heike asked for Salgado’s e-tool and patted the dirt with it. Then she handed it back to him and exhaled.

Except for Doreen and Heike, the rest of them were turned away from the freshly dug grave, their view across all the foggy stumps, the trees cut down about a hundred feet in all directions leading away from Fort Perry.

Jonah noticed one of the stumps was growing upward.

Not a stump.

The tall Molter was a single, or seemed to be when it noticed it’d been spotted and rushed them. Jonah meant to warn the others, but there was no time.

Instead, he yanked his pistol from beneath his jacket and started shooting, saving firing his automatic rifle, for he knew he would need to utilize the weapon system soon.

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CHAPTER 18

Gunfire was an undeniable warning as the towering, muscled, green Molter ran toward them.

All of them were armed, so they fired too, and after dozens of rounds, the creature somersaulted to the ground.

Thankfully, it was still a good distance away when it had been spotted. It lay still. Surely it was dead.

"Fucking thing is huge," Salgado said.

"A lot bigger than any I ever saw," Donnelly said.

It was a consensus without anyone else having to agree.

"Anyone see more?" Henry said.

"There always seems to be more," Doreen said.

Jonah didn't see any though. And no one else reacted to what was certainly stalking closer to them from the woods. Jonah wanted to exclaim it was clear but he held off. It sure didn't feel like it. And he knew better.

"Just the one I think," Salgado said.

Bernard was sweating. "Yes," he agreed nervously.

Masked Nico slowly walked toward the dead Molter.

"Going to make sure it's dead," Nico muffled under his military scarf.

A safe distance away, Nico noticed, like its cousins it had green skin, veiny muscles, and hooked, spiky teeth sprouting around its mouth. The sharp tips curved inward, their light color contrasting the dark maw of open unsated hunger.

Taking careful steps, Nico lowered the barrel of his automatic rifle, pushing on its muscular shoulder. It didn't move. So, he relaxed, turning . . .

The wind kicked up, shrieking, along with the sound of bed sheets tearing.

The dead Molter opened up behind Nico like many fleshy kites caught the wind, but instead of Infectors, four small Behemoths extended multiple legs.

They pointed and shouted and backed away.

Sven gasped. "Much bigger than the first one I saw!"

It was a Behemoth bomb.

Sven claimed to have seen one years ago, but thought maybe he'd been mistaken. He'd also suspected that even if they did exist, they no longer did, so Jonah never thought he would see one.

Mucus drenched the pale, miniature, knee-high versions of the predators that would one day grow to nearly thirty feet tall. They could already stand sturdily and hold themselves upright on somewhat shaky legs.

Like the rest of the creatures, and similar to the efficiency and ferocity of the Infector Bombs, Behemoth bombs had evolved. It seemed they were bigger and taller than other Molters. Every creature of the Molting seemed to be evolving; to lead or serve.

Somehow, the Behemoths immediately recognized the threat of the armed humans, but also knew humans were their prey. Their growls were shrunken versions of what emitted from full-grown adults.

Roars from adult Behemoths vibrated the ground, but the tiny roars coming from the newborns sounded like Behemoths had inhaled helium. The creatures were laughable compared to the giant monstrosities they would one day become.

Until speed matched ferocity. Being so new to a planet they dominated alongside Molters, survival was instinct, and three of them scrambled away like sure-footed octopuses toward rising uncut, encumbering trees.

But the fourth stood its ground, challenging the armed humans. Or was it distracting them so the other three could escape?

Even though Nico was already a good distance away from it, it growled, scuttled forward, and leapt onto him before he even could fire a shot, gripping all around him with its legs. It was like a bear hug but by an alien. And viciously, it bit into his stomach.

Sven shouted for Nico to get away from it, which didn't make any sense because there was nothing Nico could do to prevent being absorbed by the biting attack.

Gunfire.

Philip, Jacobs, Donnelly, Bernard, and Henry shot at the Behemoth newborns. They must have circled around before fleeing again. Jonah wasn't sure. He'd had eyes on Nico, trying to figure out a way to save him.

Doreen held Heike before her, ready to join in the shooting if it became necessary. But also shield Heike's view of Nico being attacked. Sven stood near them aiming a revolver.

Everything was suddenly so chaotic. The attack happened so fast. It seemed no one knew where the threat was exactly. It felt like it was on all sides of them.

Nico was wrapped up by a creature about the size of a regular-sized dog. Except a dog with eight legs. And legs with razor sharp claws on its feet. Also, a stinger-equipped tail. Nico struggled to remain upright while hollering.

His weapon was useless as it was pinned against him. Although the pale creature was somewhat blocked by the weapon, Nico shoved against it, desperately trying to get it off, even as it was ripping flesh out of him.

There wasn't much anyone could do. They couldn't shoot the combined Nico-monster thing, and the monster's tail whipped around in the air, arcing slashes of speed, keeping them at a distance.

Nico's plea turned into a scream when his scarf fell away, revealing what looked to be burn scars.

Even with all the danger, Jonah stepped closer to the dying man. But far enough away so that the creature couldn't leap onto him too, or stab him with the tail. He searched for a shot but he couldn't spot one. Not without shooting

Nico by accident.

Salgado lost his temper. He pulled out a snub-nose revolver and ran up to the struggle. “Get off him!” Salgado kicked at the thing’s back, but as it was biting Nico, it twisted and latched onto Salgado’s boot. “Ah!”

Hopping on one foot, and with the creature’s bite unshakable, Salgado leaned back with all his weight, dragging the sure-footed Behemoth and all its claw-footed legs across the dirt.

Pulling it away from Nico far enough, he carefully aimed above his boot and pulled the trigger of the double-action revolver three times. Finally, he was able to kick out of its teeth-filled mouth.

The death of the small Behemoth caused reverse momentum, and Nico and the Behemoth rolled in the other direction as a pile. Both human and creature looked to be dead.

From where the Behemoth newborns scrambled into the woods, it sounded like pigs squealing. The creatures were being fed on.

“What the fuck?” Jonah said.

Salgado caught his breath, hearing it too. “Molters are winning.”

Jonah had initially felt safe when they’d arrived at Fort Perry because the trees were cut down a good distance away from the fort. Being able to see the terrain had made him feel in control. He was wrong.

Remembering the structure and how fortified Fort Perry was from inside, it would have been a different story if they could have gone within its walls upon arrival. The defense still held its defensive capabilities, the biggest proof because it was still standing.

But for Jonah’s people standing outside the front gate, they might as well have been treading ocean water while anticipating hungry sharks.

Even though they were prepared, the next attack happened even sooner than Jonah thought. There was hardly any time to react.

He considered scrambling into a UV and driving through the gate, but doing so would allow *them* to get in too. And also might topple the ladders necessary for everyone to reach the safety of the height of the platforms.

The forest flooded with teeth and eyes and claws. All of it was land-sliding toward them. There were also tree length legs. Seemed there were some Molters still loyal to Behemoth masters because they rushed together.

From behind them—and all at once—the gate rocked, followed by the pitter of claws raking against the inside of the wood. Something was climbing the gate. From the inside.

Far too many somethings, Jonah realized.

“Roll out!” he yelled. “Henry, Doreen, Heike, get in the truck!”

The rest of them stood at the ready as the three disappeared into the cab as commanded. Two doors slammed shut a second apart, sounding like two gunshots. Both windows rolled up fast.

Henry started the truck and revved the engine. He was ready to speed away. All the rest of them needed to do was rush into the vehicles too.

But then a woman landed hard between the truck and a UV, and was still.

She must have fallen. Maybe she was thrown over? It was obvious her skin was blue. Suddenly she jolted to life.

Instead of standing upright, her blue hands clawed at the dirt. Her skin cracked open—where it was visible around her clothing—in red seams. A molting had begun.

"Drive!" Jonah shouted.

Henry didn't, though. When Jonah took a step closer, he instantly learned why. It was all over his face. Henry wasn't about to do what he'd demanded of Jonah at Henrytown.

Strength in numbers. Better to wait for the rest of them.

Doreen hugged Heike inside the cab. They were frightened.

The thing that used to be a human woman suddenly raked at the ground with freshly sprouted claws. Pinky fingers on both hands sloughed off.

Green fingers sprouted pale claws, and they ripped at a woman's face. After it was no longer a human but a creature, its hands went after the rest of what it had been, scraping more bloody flesh away.

The molting was complete. It flipped onto its stomach, predatory eyes spotting humans for the first time. What the thing used to be, human, it now considered to be its prey.

Slowly rising to its clawed feet in a crouch, bloody flesh dripping out tattered clothes, it growled . . . then howled.

Molters landed behind it in formation. They were the ones clawing at the inside of Fort Perry. But the creatures on the other side of the walls seemed to have held off for the molting to be complete.

Molters spread out.

Now their paths to the vehicles were blocked.

And many more Molters were rampaging toward them at their backs, along with Behemoths.

Why didn't they fire weapons already?

Jonah needed to do something. He must figure out a way to help the others escape . . .

The Behemoth bomb was taller than the other Molters, but the Molters advancing on them and blocking their path were all the same height.

Height.

With Jonah's family safely in the truck to his left, he holstered his pistol and swung the automatic rifle strapped around him to his front. He aimed at the group.

Hopefully Molters couldn't understand language.

"Drop, men!" Jonah shouted and waved an arm. "Down on the ground, now!" Pointing fervently. "All of you!"

When they dropped to the dirt, flattening themselves, Jonah pulled the trigger in three-round bursts.

Bullets punching through Molter flesh also ricocheted off up-armor.

Fortunately, Jonah had insisted on staggered parking. The bloodsuckers were standing in front of the up-armored UVs, not the pickup trucks. There was plenty of space between all the vehicles.

Their eyes locked on the one firing, Jonah aimed high, head or throat or chest shots, and one loaded magazine dropped a dozen Molters. Hideous and green skinned, Infector bombs every one of them.

"Clear!"

Jonah buttoned out the expended magazine, put it in his cargo pocket, and slapped in a loaded magazine from the same pocket. He yanked the charging handle, chambering the first round for whatever came at them next. The men got themselves upright.

Jacobs wasn't moving. He remained on the ground. Sven dragged him by the arm until Bernard ran over to help, but he tripped and fell. Donnelly waved him off. He picked Jacobs off the ground and grunted him over his shoulder, and Philip helped Bernard upright.

Endless Molters were in the forest now. Maybe the ones from the firing line the night before had discovered Fort Perry? Not an impossible pace, but highly unlikely. It meant it was a different horde. One hunting the day.

Jutting movement. A swarm of Infectors darted between stumps. As each second passed, they were closer to biting whoever they could sink their small teeth into.

The unnerving creatures born from Behemoth cocoons, and secreted by Behemoths up to a certain maturity, or from a Molter filled with them—an Infector bomb—crawled. They looked like spiders but with slick, shiny legs.

Infectors soon blanketed what was left of the Behemoth bomb. And then also Nico's corpse and the carcass of the baby Behemoth.

There were *snaps* and *cracks* of trees falling over. Behemoths roared in the forest.

As Henry revved the truck, more engines started. People piled in wherever they could, into whichever vehicle was closest.

Rising up into the gunner's hatch, Jonah swiveled the SAR and aimed it at hundreds of advancing creatures . . .

But held his fire. Even taking his finger off the trigger.

The convoy sped away, creating more and more distance.

Something told Jonah to be mindful of bullet discipline. To fire when absolutely necessary. And that he was going to need every single round of ammunition for the SAR weapon system.

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CHAPTER 19

The battle at Fort Perry was in the rearview mirror, and they'd barely gotten away, but now there were four vehicles in the convoy instead of six. The supplies and weapons in the other vehicles had to be abandoned.

And they were driving at night. Never ideal for traveling the road.

With the loss of Nico, Myers, and Patty, Sven drove Jonah and Philip in the lead vehicle, the UV with the SAR at the gunner's hatch.

Henry, Heike, and Doreen were in the lone pickup truck.

Donnelly drove with Bernard—as well as the unconscious Jacobs in the back seat—in the third vehicle, the UV with the grenade launcher at the gunner's hatch.

And Salgado drove himself in the rear vehicle, the UV Myers drove to Fort Perry. The UVs were military vehicles so the ignitions didn't require a key. A turn of a switch turned the engines over.

When he'd served, Jonah remembered steering wheels secured by a thick wire and a padlock. A key to unlock the padlocks were the only keys required to start driving. Thankfully, anyone could turn the ignition switch. It had saved lives.

From behind the SAR, it was impossible for Jonah not to see all the tall trees with sporadic dark, bulbous cocoons. The Behemoths within them looked ready to be born. They hung heavy from branches. It reassured Jonah how beneficial his clearing had been at the cabin.

But it wasn't the case around here.

"The trees look decorated," Salgado radioed, *"in a messed-up way."*

Even if Behemoths had begun the Molting only to die off, they sure weren't dying off any time soon. There were separate wars going on for supremacy of the earth simultaneously.

Where humans were once on top and dominating, they were now scrambling to even hang on to their existence.

Whenever we do reach for the top again, creatures will reach down with sharp claws to bring us to their sharp teeth.

But we're ready, Jonah thought.

"Whenever we get to wherever we're going, maybe we should cut down trees like at Fort Perry?" Salgado radioed.

"Too much work." Henry radioed. *"And too dangerous. There's only one Jonah."*

"But we have Jonah with us."

"The last thing we need right now is to face down a group of newborn Behemoths head on."

"How about from a distance like he does? I have a thermal scope."

Jonah was barely able to hear the speaker beneath him. A thermal scope?

What a find. A thermal scope was something he'd always wanted to utilize while aiming his bolt-action rifle on the ridges.

Jonah crouched. "Tell them we'll decide if it should be done once we get north."

Sven steered with his left hand and grabbed the mic with his right. *"Jonah says we'll all know whether it's silly to worry about trees near a sea when we get there."*

Jonah stood and chuckled as he scanned the dark road ahead, looking for any movement whatsoever, appreciating Sven's humor. Even though they'd recently lost people at Fort Perry.

Jonah's view was clear enough, resistant to the rushing wind as he was wearing goggles. And he was warm enough too, wearing his black stocking cap with the hood of his waterproof cold-weather jacket tight over his head.

As he manned the SAR, he was a gunner, a grunt, as he had been during the war before this one. But he was also in charge of this convoy.

Something dragged his attention to the right . . . but he saw nothing.

The feeling was vaguely familiar. It was the same way he'd felt while at the military base in Oberstein all those years ago, when he set the trap for the first Behemoth he'd encountered. And killed. Something was moving around out there. He could sense it.

Lifting the SAR, he did an about-face to the rear of the vehicle and settled the bipod until it was secure, aiming over the roofs of the vehicles.

With the reduced convoy in view, Jonah felt the pang of mistakes.

Salgado surely wanted to man the grenade launcher mounted on the UV Donnelly drove with Bernard in the passenger seat, the third vehicle in the convoy, but he was currently behind the wheel of the rear vehicle in the convoy. Alone.

Bernard was a cook. He could handle regular firearms, and he could be trained, but he didn't have experience with a weapon system like a fully automatic grenade launcher. Few did, unless they served in the military. Grenades were rare and not to be wasted for target practice.

And Jonah couldn't very well command Jacobs to man the grenade launcher as he was unconscious in the back seat of Donnelly's UV. Everyone knew why. No one had seen the Infector bite Jacobs, but a molting was in his future.

The future molting would have to be dealt with—by being prevented—but there was no time for it now. If Jonah needed to be the one to pull the trigger during the coming days, he would.

Jonah didn't have the time to place everyone in the vehicles where they would be most effective. Not while scrambling to get away from Fort Perry to survive. But as soon as he got the chance, he'd organize everyone in the vehicles according to skillset.

At least Sven, one of their best drivers, was one of those behind the wheel.

Though Jonah was warm enough, he still got chills. Gooseflesh radiated up

and down his arms. And it wasn't from the cold.

It was because he could sense what was looming. He couldn't see as well because headlights blasted out the front of the three vehicles, dominating his eye line.

He put a hand to the side of his mouth and yelled downward. "Sven, drive to the rear! Philip, get on the radio and inform the others what we're about to do! And turn up the speaker volume so I can hear better!"

Beneath him, Jonah saw Philip pivot his attention from the passenger seat window, to the hand mic Sven handed him from the driver's seat. *"This is Philip in the lead vehicle. Don't be alarmed, we are moving to the rear."*

"Philip, keep the mic in hand!"

"OK!"

Sven gave a slight twist to the steering wheel, nudging the UV to the right, testing the muddy shoulder, and then drove completely over to it, slowing down as he did.

Doreen looked worried, and Heike stared at him as they sped ahead.

Heike's still mad at me. Still upset. Still sad. Of course she is. And of course she should be.

Jonah waved at her anyway, and gave Doreen a thumbs up before they faded from his view.

With the three vehicles gone past, making the truck Henry drove to be the lead vehicle, Sven twisted the steering wheel to the left, nudging the UV back onto the road. Now Jonah could see the darkness better.

Well enough to feel like he got kicked in the gut.

His senses were correct. Random appearances of teeth and claws and bulbous eyes darted in and out of the gloom.

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CHAPTER 20

Jonah gasped. "Fucking hell! Philip! Tell Henry to floor it! Right fucking now!"

"Faster than Henrytown," Sven added.

"Henry," Philip radioed. *"Jonah is instructing you to go faster than you did at Henrytown."*

"OK," Doreen radioed right away.

Jonah twisted his view to see Henry's truck lurch forward with more speed, and Jonah placed a gloved hand to brace himself as the rest of the vehicles floored it as commanded. The rumbling torque of the engines kept up with the demands of the drivers.

Molters weren't fast enough to catch up to the vehicles, not at their speeds. Except the creatures were coming up the road after them. And they were spilling over the hills on both sides.

It meant the convoy had driven ahead of a horde. Jonah had noticed in time but they still might end up driving through the middle of them.

The snarling, growling, and howling surged; thousands of dogfights happening simultaneously. Each and every one of the bloodthirsty creatures competed for the few of the convoy with human blood in their veins.

"Faster!" Jonah shouted.

"Will you drive faster?" Philip radioed.

Not likely, Jonah thought. It was difficult to do on an unfamiliar road at night. At any time, their path might be blocked by abandoned vehicles. Hopefully not by the horde. But he needed Henry to keep up the speed.

Wasn't Jonah recently sleeping away a hangover on a beach in California? There was no way to foresee what would happen. No time for humans to prepare for such a situation, as they typically did.

The world practically changed overnight. And there wasn't a damn thing anyone could do about it.

Well, there's something I can do.

Philip didn't need to inform by radio. Jonah's gunfire sent the message. The pressure of his trigger finger was instant and endless, a deafening bark of bullets, drowning out his feelings of dread.

After feeling so useless, and helpless as Frox's prisoner not so long ago—something anyone, especially a soldier or a former one, hated—Jonah took it out on *them* with the SAR.

The night erupted with more gunfire as if a lightning storm struck the middle of endless darkness.

The report of the continuous fire of the SAR would have been too loud if Jonah wasn't wearing earplugs. Even those who weren't planning to shoot, were advised to keep them in their ears.

Jonah and his people were likely some of the last people on Earth, forced to seek refuge on the road. Winter had offered so much protection, but the melting did not.

Melting snow practically transformed the world into rivers surging down the mountains, spraying up endless steady mist when meeting tires, adding chaos to the darkness and fog and hunger from monsters and fired bullets.

"Molters and Behemoths are everywhere!" Salgado radioed.

Weapons shot in every direction, illuminating the darkness enough for Jonah to glimpse the Behemoths among Molters. They looked to be much larger than any he'd ever seen.

Maybe they were ones big and strong enough to survive this long. To live long enough to get to grow to their size. And were able to resist Molter attacks.

The road veered right and left and straight. The vehicles climbed small rises and descended short hills so fast, it made Jonah's stomach drop.

Though the initial sight of them caused a panic, the speed of the vehicles slowly pulling away from them eventually alleviated the dread of being submerged into the midst of predatory hunger.

Jonah ceased fire. The others did too. The barrel of the SAR smoked in his eyeline.

He crouched down and fell back onto a seat, grabbing a canteen and chugging water before wiping his mouth. He reached forward, waiting.

Philip raised the passenger window he'd been firing his weapon out of and handed Jonah the radio mic.

"Clear," Jonah said. "For now."

"Never clear enough, man," Salgado radioed. *"Just saying. You know what I'm saying?"*

Jonah thumbed the mic again. "Yeah."

"How many rounds are left in the ammo box?" Sven said while eyeing Jonah in the rearview mirror.

"I'll check," Jonah said. "On it."

Jonah stood back up into the cold of night and its endless wind. He went about weapon maintenance, mindful of the hot barrel of the SAR.

Good stuff, Sven.

They were working as a team. Jonah felt relief he could finally rely on others for their contributions to the mission, including keeping an eye out for even his temporary blind spot.

Of course the weapon needed to be reloaded. The fight north was only beginning.

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CHAPTER 21

An ancient battlefield. An upended slide away from the civilized town it once was. It had been somewhere people lived and thrived. But now it was abandoned and deemed unlivable. It had likely housed thousands of Molter nests. Until it was destroyed.

The muddy structures were barely upright, leaned, had fallen down, or were reduced to bits. Destroyed by the abandoned tanks, even more powerful weapons, like howitzers, and other explosives.

Weapon systems capable of keeping a horde at bay were now unmanned. Some were knocked over. Jonah remembered how the Behemoths reacted to howitzers at the firing line.

Then there were the bodies. Corpses were everywhere—Molter and man—and the stench of death was visible by the fog of flies. Battles like the one Jonah and the others witnessed were obviously not rare.

Because they'd left packed vehicles behind at Fort Perry, they decided to restock. If they could. Philip and Bernard were tasked to rummage through what remained to collect whatever weapons and ammo they could find.

They were given a half an hour for the mission. Jonah guarded them with the SAR. Locating weapons was their main objective. Use could be decided by the group later.

Philip and Bernard were careful as they grabbed any small caliber weapons they could carry by hand: pistols, shotguns, rifles, grenades, and ammo.

Any make or model of weapon would be considered to take along, whether they were loaded or unloaded. Whenever they saw bullet boxes, they grabbed those too. They put everything they gathered in backpacks and duffle bags.

Once bags were full, they were left and runners—Donnelly and Salgado—would grab them up and load them in one of the vehicles, designated where having room by Doreen.

"Mortars?" Bernard shouted.

"Negative!" Jonah shouted back.

Because of the fuel situation, no choice but to reduce to three vehicles. The two UVs with the highly destructive weapon systems—SAR and grenade launcher—attached, and the backup truck Henry drove. It was now the primary pickup truck.

Salgado had already siphoned fuel from the UV being left behind.

"This would be going a lot faster if we all were out there," Henry radioed.

Jonah checked his watch. "A few more minutes."

Sven keyed the mic from the driver's seat. *"We're leaving soon."*

If Philip and Bernard discover anything of importance, that isn't a two-man carry, then others will be sent to help, Jonah thought.

While searching for any movement, ready to fire at any type of threat,

Jonah noticed how many dead creatures there were. Even more than he initially thought. But he didn't mention it. Everyone saw.

The devastating and unexpected attack and fall of the town and its people was nothing new to members of the convoy.

During previous battles, it had been possible to dispose of the corpses by burying or burning them, obviously, but no longer. There were too many dead. Whoever had fought for the town died. Or abandoned their homes. Jonah didn't blame them.

Aside from a few walls, no structures were left intact. In fact, hardly anything was vertical. The constant was dirt and mud, and dirt and mud could be found elsewhere in the country. And earth could be found anywhere there wasn't water.

It was ironic a sea was where *they* were headed.

Sustained silence was the result of seeing so many human corpses among the dead. Scattered and buried under the battle, even beneath the creatures, were human arms and legs sticking out at impossible angles.

Because Jonah had to pay such close attention, he couldn't avoid such details while aiming through the sight picture of the SAR. In a way, it was like looking at the town under a microscope.

The town wasn't overrun, or those who were ordinarily tasked with keeping everyone alive had failed in their task. It had been completely overwhelmed.

The uncountable number of dead meant there were as many or more Molters and Behemoths that attacked Archard's—then Frox's, then no one's—firing line.

"Wish I could drive one of those tanks," Salgado radioed.

"Tell him he's got enough firepower," Jonah said.

Sven told him over the radio, and Salgado laughed before thumbing off.

Rummaging around, Philip and Bernard were cautious. There could be Molters lying in wait as they'd been known to do. To remain still until prey entered their territory was dominant behavior for Molters.

And the territory of a lone Molter could be the upper floor of an abandoned home, a cave, or even stretch for miles. It was why Jonah's trigger finger remained ready to depress, and would remain there until they drove away.

Aside from weapons, they added what was essential because there was only so much extra space to fill within the three vehicles.

Jonah positioned everyone in the vehicles more effectively. Once again, Jonah was standing in the gunner's hatch of the lead UV with Sven driving it, and Philip was in the passenger seat manning the radio.

Henry, Doreen, and Heike were in the middle vehicle, the only pickup truck.

Donnelly drove the rear UV. Bernard was in the passenger seat manning its radio, Jacobs remained unconscious in the back seat, and Salgado manned the grenade launcher at the gunner's hatch.

Looking past Salgado—who was wearing goggles too and gave Jonah a thumbs up—Jonah stared at the empty UV with all four doors open. Another vehicle of use being left behind. It gave him the same homesick feeling after leaving the cabin for some reason.

Probably because he'd spent so many years driving the vehicles. It felt like he was leaving another piece of himself behind.

Even so, after the drive north, bittersweet or not, he hoped to never lay eyes on a UV again.

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CHAPTER 22

Potty breaks were coordinated. Once those words were spoken over the radio, the men relieved themselves. If they needed to.

Typically, potty breaks happened when the ladies, Doreen and Heike, needed to go, who went together.

When men poured out their urine-filled water bottles, lead vehicles had the courtesy to slow down so as not to accidentally spray gunners behind them.

If someone needed to dig a hole and go number two, it was still referred to as a potty break. And stopping for so long was always an opportunity to tip fuel canisters.

Better to keep gas tanks topped off than get into a situation when they were unable to stop. Then they would be forced to watch fuel gauge needles point closer to empty.

For some reason, Jonah expected civilization to somehow improve as every kilometer ticked by. It was wishful thinking. Unfortunately, as the days went on, they passed through many other vacant towns. They were as decimated as the one they'd scavenged.

But at least—it seemed—they'd put the horde behind them.

Some structures were still intact and upright, but many were destroyed. Town limits looked like a mouth full of crooked teeth. And teeth were knocked out.

Drivers slept in shifts, replaced by volunteers within the same vehicles. Anyone else, who wasn't a gunner—who wasn't Jonah or Salgado—could close their eyes and rest whenever they wanted.

It was easy enough to wake up someone in the passenger seat to get on the radio or grab the mic themselves.

And gunfire was an efficient alarm clock. Too often lone Molters took interest in speeding vehicles.

Jacobs remained unconscious. His skin was blue and puffy in a recognizable way. Everyone knew what was happening to him. It was even hinted at over the radio.

Jonah hadn't expected everyone to make it north alive, but he'd honestly believed those who left the cabin together would still be breathing. Not to have lost three already: Myers, Patty, and Nico.

Though a dangerous place, Fort Perry had been familiar, and the reason Jonah was convinced they needed to go there. Going somewhere Jonah had been before, seemed controllable to him for some reason.

Similar to how people typically lived where they'd grown up, no matter

how dangerous, going to Fort Perry had been a mistake. Any hope of rescuing survivors was extinguished by the absence of them, and the deaths of their own people.

Jonah forced his regret to go away. It was pointless to dwell. As long as they were still driving, they were getting closer to their destination.

His stress, all he'd been feeling, kept him up at night. Night after night, for years. But it was slowly diminishing. For the first time in his life, he envisioned a future without a war. He saw it clearly in his head, and being happy with a family.

He wondered how many times Doreen wanted to get pregnant. He would definitely be flexible about the number.

Jonah remembered how he'd been before meeting her. When he'd been an empty shell. Just a survivor. A killer. He wasn't just those things anymore. He didn't feel the same either. He was so much stronger now, emotionally and physically.

No matter what the future held, good or bad, he would handle it. He *could* handle it. Because he wasn't alone. He was part of a family. And families handled obstacles together.

The end of the war for all of them, hopefully, would be a cruise ship in sight.

"Where to after the boat?" Donnelly radioed.

Jonah was glad he wasn't alone thinking optimistically.

"A place with planes, and those planes have pilots," Salgado radioed.

Philip grabbed the mic from the passenger seat. *"Hopefully, rumors are true."*

"It doesn't matter as long as we're well away from the horde," Donnelly radioed.

"Yeah, but there could be more hordes in other places," Salgado radioed.

Henry broke in. *"One horde at a time, gentlemen."*

There were all kinds of rumors. Jonah didn't believe them all, especially the one about how the Molter threat was ending. No more people were molting. Jacobs's condition proved that wrong. At least for the time being in Deutschland.

And no more Behemoth cocoons forming wasn't accurate either. They'd already seen hundreds growing in the trees during their drive. And surely there were hundreds, or even thousands more, growing out of sight.

All of the rumors about the Molting ending would be nice, Jonah thought, but there were no facts to back up such current optimism.

Although what was happening was similar to other plagues from the past, how it burned through humanity and reduced the population significantly, the Molting might actually succeed in causing human extinction. Where previous

plagues had failed.

Behemoths were the primordial ooze. Molters were the things sprouting legs and walking out of it onto land. Lately, Molters could birth Infectors as they were Infector bombs.

Maybe a Molter's life cycle was similar to how male humans can't have babies but female humans can. It would categorize their sexless existence better.

Regardless, the trajectory of their evolution was astronomical. The creatures could dominate Earth and destroy human beings forever. Be their extinction event.

Except humans still currently breathed. Jonah and his people driving north was proof of human resilience, as Sven once said.

Perhaps the Molting would be an evolutionary flash in the pan, as so many other species that walked or crawled over the surface of this planet during its history.

Jonah would do his best to ensure human beings were not among the species lost to time. And forgotten. He was positive the others with him would remain integral to the mission.

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CHAPTER 23

An explosion.

Another.

Thump-boom.

Thump-boom.

Salgado.

The ground vibrated with each eruption. It felt like Jonah had recently only closed his eyes but he'd nodded off. Practically unpreventable, because of how long he'd remained awake while others rested. But he was alert immediately.

He raised goggles over his eyes, put his hood up over his head, cinched it tight, and climbed up the gunner's hatch. He placed a gloved hand on the SAR handle, feeling the familiarity of the weapon.

He shivered. The cold of night discovered a new victim, nibbling at his cheeks below his eyes, where his beard didn't grow.

At first, he stared ahead, temporarily entranced as the bright high beam headlights of the lead vehicle shone into the darkness.

Behemoths weren't why Salgado had gone loud. None Jonah could see. Which meant Molters.

Jonah squinted . . . Yes, there were Molters all right.

They needed to drive around them. Somehow.

Salgado continued to pepper the enemy with consistent controlled blasts, like a patient drummer.

Being in the rear vehicle, Salgado was closer to the enemy. The fact he wasn't auto-firing meant there were far more than one destructive weapon could handle. It meant he was being methodical where he aimed the grenades, like a sniper.

Sliding his finger against the fat, comfortable trigger of the SAR, Jonah joined in with his battle buddy, going loud with the weapon, belching its war capability.

There was no choice. There were creatures on both sides of the convoy. Some Molters even got run over.

From windows, barrel blasts flashed at insatiable predators. By the headlights and gunfire—by anyone who held a weapon—the segmented convoy emitted the faint glow of humanity. Humans who were battling endless, churning and moving darkness that was alive.

Jonah continued to shoot into the cascading flood of Molters. Creatures rampaged like a tsunami crashing onto a shore. There was not a Behemoth among them. If there were any this far north, they'd all probably been sucked dry.

Along the road and up the slopes visible by the periphery reach of vehicle

headlights, Infector bombs opened up like silent firecrackers, vomiting uncountable mucus drenched Infectors.

"Easy, brother!" Philip shouted up at Jonah from the passenger seat. "Or we're going to have to change out the fucking barrel! No time for it!"

He was right. Jonah should ease down. Others fired weapons. He should remain methodical, like Salgado.

Controlled bursts, as he was trained to do, but it was easy to get carried away. Except he must keep them at bay. He spotted a cocoon in a tree. It was dark yellow, with discolorations all over it. Throbbing, glistening with organic warmth.

He'd seen similar Behemoth cocoons before. The creature within would likely be introduced to Earth shortly. It looked like it was about to burst.

Because the UV remained as the lead vehicle, behind Jonah was constant gunfire: automatic rifles, but handguns too.

Even if Jonah could magically put the battle on pause and change out the barrel of the SAR, the Molters were too close. Every vehicle was about to get overrun, no matter how fast the convoy was going, or how much ammo was expendable.

Whenever Jonah spotted a cocoon like the one ahead, he shot them with his rifle, thankful he'd spotted it when he had because he was located at a safe distance.

Years before, when his strategy was different, he would hit them with a rocket launcher. At that stage, Jonah could actually see what was growing within the cocoon as it stretched. Because it was about to be born from the sac.

Aiming ahead, targeting the cocoon, he breathed out and in, out and in, tracking his target, and squeezed the trigger, thinking back to basic training and counted in his head:

Three-to-five-round burst.

Three-to-five-round burst.

Three-to-five-round burst.

The first salvo of bullets split the ripe sac open precisely where he intended, at the base, and the second and third finished the job.

The newborn monstrosity fell out of the cocoon prematurely, landing awkwardly on the ground. Jonah took his finger off the trigger, the barrel smoking in his line of sight.

Molters were predictable in their determination at least, so the ones closest to the newborn Behemoth instantly lost interest in pursuing speeding vehicles and went after the easier prey instead, as any predator would.

The Behemoth was already buried under starving Molters, moments away from engulfing the convoy.

The thump and boom of Salgado's grenade launcher fell silent.

Then everyone else ceased fire.

And the horde fell back . . . further . . . and further.

Until the only sound of the horde was it feeding somewhere in the darkness, like one giant beast.

The prehistoric feeding ritual—many converging on one—was chilling, but natural, and eventually the powerful reverberation of modern engines silenced the horror.

An invention of mankind drove them away from the brutality of what would always happen. And closer north to what would be for *them*.

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CHAPTER 24

There was snow on the ground in patches. Jonah could see his breath. Abandoned vehicles littered the road at improvised and desperate turns.

Cars, vans, and trucks were pulled off to the shoulder, but they'd smashed into vehicles already in the ditch, and a speeding semitruck had plowed through gridlocked traffic. It was tipped over on its side.

Some vehicles were still parked in the middle of the road, which meant drivers of the convoy needed to slow down to steer around them, keeping everyone on edge.

"Nice chopper," Salgado radioed.

The American motorcycle could rumble the world with a twist of its throttle. It balanced on the kickstand. Perhaps its rider noticed something of interest but didn't return?

That was the optimistic hypotheses. What actually happened was likely much bloodier.

"Jonah," Donnelly radioed.

Up in the gunner's hatch, Philip patted Jonah's boot from below. With no enemies in sight, Jonah crouched down and briefly interrupted the unending whine of the gusty and chilly wind.

He lowered his hood and raised his goggles to his forehead. The moment he did, his cheeks warmed.

The heat was always on in the UV, one of the benefits of being below and within. Philip passed Jonah the mic.

"Go ahead."

"Jacobs," Donnelly radioed. *"We must do something for him."*

Everyone knew how blue-skinned Jacobs would end up. What he would become. But no one wanted to handle it yet. No one ever did. It meant the end of his life, but what else could be done?

Jonah knew why there was hesitation. Everyone was tired of euthanizing loved ones. But also, a molting often took longer these days. He didn't know why and no one else did either. When the Molting first began, sometimes people molted within a day. Now it sometimes took five.

Thinking briefly about the woman who'd molted at Fort Perry, the specific time they were there, how she fell and molted before their eyes so quickly . . .

It was a blind spot. There was still so much they didn't know.

And maybe it was because of the unknown, Jonah suspected, as some of them did—especially those who were friends of Jacobs—maybe the Molting would simply end, the infection in Jacobs would burn through him. Somehow, he'd simply wake up.

There were millions of creatures pursuing them proving otherwise, though. It was a fantasy and must remain one.

"Understood."

"And we're getting low on fuel. Recommend merging passengers."

Again? Jonah considered it. *Where the hell are we going to put everyone?*

"There's all those cars around us right now," Salgado radioed. *"I bet some of them have gas in the tank."*

Jonah doubted it. But while Salgado checked, they could handle Jacobs. "Henry, do you copy?"

"Yes," Doreen answered for him.

Sven automatically took his foot off the accelerator, slowing the three-vehicle convoy, soon to be two, and stopped.

So many times vehicles needed to pull off onto the shoulder. These days, the middle of the road suited fine. And with the shoulders so crammed with abandoned vehicles, the middle of the road was the safest location.

There was something about standing still on a freeway—in this case the autobahn—that made Jonah feel like they were even more vulnerable. Probably because, normally, when roads were bumper to bumper, doing so meant the chance of getting hit by a speeding car.

Something else occurred to him. Condensing from three vehicles to two meant dumping even more supplies, even weapons. Not ideal. But what choice did they have?

Exiting vehicles, everyone, except for Heike—and Jacobs who was still human at the moment—gathered near the pickup truck.

"Because the grenade launcher is mounted, will you transfer fuel from the lead vehicle?" Jonah said to Salgado as he approached.

"Let me knock on some other gas tanks first," Salgado said without slowing, and heading back toward the cars scattered across the autobahn they'd passed already.

"What do we leave behind?" Doreen said. "We need everything."

"Food, water, weapons and ammo are the priority. Everything we can't hold with our own two hands needs to go to make room for passengers."

"Not my stuffy, right, Mom?" Heike said from the truck window she'd rolled down, so she could hear the conversation.

"No, you can keep it, sweetie."

"You're keeping the S-A-R of course," Donnelly said to Jonah. "And the grenade launcher and rocket launchers."

"I guess it comes down to our personal favorites," Henry said.

Salgado called out from the distance. "I already got my favorite mounted!"

Jonah lost his prior favorites while a prisoner at Fort Perry. But a weapon was a weapon. As long as Jonah carried a pistol, automatic rifle, and there was a machete on his hip, he was good to go. But if everything went sideways, a blade and booted feet would suffice.

Salgado carried an empty fuel canister and siphon hose he retrieved from the UV, where Jacobs was inside.

Jonah cupped a hand to the side of his mouth. "Anything yet?"

"No!"

"What do you think?"

"I think we're wasting time!"

"Let's go with plan A!"

Salgado actioned agreement by hustling past them to the former lead vehicle. Minutes later he was already siphoning into the empty fuel canister.

Jonah eyed the rear vehicle. *Jacobs is in there.* He removed his pistol from its holster under his arm.

"That won't be necessary."

Someone patted Jonah on the back gently. When Jonah turned around, Sven was holding a syringe.

"A peaceful death," he said. "Something I never hope to give again for as long as I live."

Jonah appreciated that. He squeezed his shoulder. "It will be."

"It must."

"Get the e-tools!" Jonah shouted.

It was getting lighter out as Jacobs was buried and words were said. Though necessary and undeniably human, the custom delayed driving and by doing so, it increased the danger.

At least the tradition allowed them to be human, and take time to make the room necessary in the UV for extra passengers.

There were many necessities on the side of the road. It was something Jonah had witnessed before and always thought people were being wasteful. He'd even rummaged through such piles, shaking his head with disgust as he did.

But he was wrong to do so. Whoever did it was desperate to survive. As they now were. He remembered finding the windup radio in the shack near the cabin before he discovered the cave, and thinking people didn't know what was important.

Now, he knew better. He had his skin on his back and the ones he cared about still had theirs.

Right then, the wind fell away like a flame being snuffed out to submerge the world in unfamiliar darkness. For a few seconds, Jonah heard only ringing in his ears.

The air turned humid too, similar to how it was being in a large group. Like a sports stadium. Where there was a lot of extra body heat.

He glanced around as everyone continued to load up and get ready to go, but they weren't reacting. He wasn't going to alarm everyone if he didn't have to, but he got a familiar ping on his inner radar, similar to how it was possible to sense when a storm was approaching.

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CHAPTER 25

As their roars rose, louder and louder as every second ticked by, the bloodthirsty monsters closer to revealing themselves, his stomach dropped. He'd been correct. There was an approaching storm, but one made of creatures raining down crimson droplets.

Jonah turned toward where his inner radar directed him. What he saw was madness. He'd never seen so many. Not clearly. Not during the day. Every space of distance was covered by them.

It was the horde in all its might, moving, running, skittering in every direction. The natural spacing between them Jonah had seen before when they were in packs, was absent. They were overcrowded together and dominantly confident.

Had they been hunting the convoy? Could Molters track the scent of vehicles? Was exhaust perceptible to them? Maybe it was as noticeable as smoke for human beings.

Jonah had never considered it because he hadn't been in a situation when he'd driven for such a long distance. Undoubtedly, Molter numbers had never been higher. Maybe even the mass of them coincidentally decided to go north too.

The rushing predators jutted forward in throbbing waves, a burst dam having built up with strength for years, and hunger needing to be sated. Thankfully, the current road behind them was flat. It allowed them to anticipate. And ready themselves for the next move.

The Molters were still a ways off, but there were so many they could be heard from the distance. It looked like every piece of the earth was planted with clawed feet. And now the others noticed. Their eyes were often on Jonah to follow his lead.

Whether it was decided, or a consensus or not, Jonah was indeed their leader. What he saw, they did, and what he decided needed to be done, to leave, was an unspoken command. They rushed to the two vehicles.

Jonah spotted, in the pile of abandoned supplies, a rocket launcher. They possessed extras of the same weapon system, but not one of them should be wasted. It was the one-shot, fire-and-forget kind after all.

Marching over and rooting it out—he swung it around to get a blanket off—he crossed the road to the far side.

He readied the devastating weapon and assumed the correct firing position, placing the launcher over his right shoulder.

He took a quick glance behind him before aiming. "Back blast area clear!"

Aiming the rocket launcher low center, at the undulating and sickening mass of them, he depressed the trigger.

Streaking across the grayish landscape, the warhead struck against the fast-

moving creatures, erupting with an explosion that rumbled the ground beneath their feet.

Molters were vaporized, and the ones near the explosion launched into the air. Some remained whole. Others' legs and arms and heads came off. The blast was quickly absorbed by a cloud of smoke.

But so many more of what thirsted for blood emerged unfazed. Jonah dropped the expended weapon system onto the grass.

Doreen shouted, "Behind you!"

Even though the window was rolled down, her voice was muffled by being inside the truck, but Jonah didn't have to turn to understand. He knew what happened.

And why it was suddenly so much louder. Why the lovely voice of a woman could barely pierce through such horror.

The encompassing volume of them was because Molters were on all sides. The tactic meant a feeding was certain. It was then, when the rest of the creatures revealed themselves.

They were surrounded.

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CHAPTER 26

Donnelly exchanged places with Bernard, so Bernard could drive. Donnelly was a better shooter. He aimed from the passenger seat.

Bernard and Henry were both seconds from speeding everyone away. But even if the drivers floored it, what hungered for them was coming in too fast. And from every direction. Including their front.

There were four hundred rounds in the ammo box attached to the SAR. Jonah had reloaded it. And he remembered the crate of incendiary grenades he'd been saving. It was time to put them to use. He rushed to the bed of the pickup truck to fill his pockets.

Jonah's life, whatever he'd wanted for himself, didn't matter anymore. All that did matter was keeping those he cared for safe. And there was one way to make it happen.

"Whatever it takes," Jonah said into the driver's side window to Henry.

"Jonah?" Doreen said across Henry from the passenger side.

He winked at his wife. "I love you!"

Jonah hefted the SAR off the ground by the carrying handle, the weapon meant to go along with the convoy after he joined them with it in hand.

Then he faced the uncountable monsters, aiming the weapon from the shoulder firing position. There were so many Molters, a nightmare made real, there was no reason to eye down the sight picture.

When they yelled for him, he yelled, "Go!" without turning around.

Sensing what he was about to do, the Molters converged. Snarling and howling and growling, undeterred, they were about to overtake all the humans.

Until Jonah went loud with the SAR, unleashing 6mm rounds at fourteen rounds per second. The nonstop bullets sawed through veiny muscular flesh and heads and limbs and anything else in its firing path.

Jonah's continuous machine gun fire was a constant bark of rounds rifling down the smoking hot barrel, the muzzle flashes igniting the gray gloom of day.

Bits and chunks of gore and bone and blood popped, sprayed, and even entire body parts sloughed off.

Once Jonah pulled the trigger, the Molters devolved from aggressors, into any other frightened animals, and actually ran away, some even into one another.

He realized that in order to apply the correct engagement techniques and continue to control the large target area, he needed to apply what he'd learned during basic training. Natural athleticism aided soldiering skills.

To engage so many targets—the creatures didn't forget about how hungry they were—he moved the muzzle of the weapon left and right laterally, as

well as up and down, mowing down Molters with the SAR.

The weapon system was a bladed brush painting wet, glistening gore.

To keep them at bay, and for successive aiming points throughout the width of his sector of fire, which was quite wide, he made changes, minor ones, based on experience.

There would be no reloading. So, he kept on shooting.

He shifted his shoulders or moved his elbows, but always kept his body aligned to remain directly behind the weapon.

The SAR clicked empty and the barrel smoked to the point it looked like it might burst into flames. Jonah had exhausted every bullet in the ammo box.

Dropping the destructive SAR, and as it *clacked* to the ground, Jonah swung the automatic rifle from his back, yanked off the strap around him to hold it freely, switched the selector switch from safe to fire, and fired.

Pulling the trigger made Molters fall until all thirty rounds were expended and it too clicked empty. He dropped the weapon.

The mass of creatures knitted back together, again with the strength they were before. Bolder now, as they noticed the immediate danger of the SAR was abandoned behind Jonah. As was the automatic rifle. They were much closer to him.

An explosion turned part of the horde into a pile of dead Molters. Thankfully, Jonah wasn't alone in this fight.

Before moving forward, Jonah saw Doreen holding the antique grenade launcher she'd given him as a gift. A holiday present. She lowered the weapon and yelled something impossible for him to hear. No doubt she was pleading for him to return.

Even more Molters appeared beyond. They'd been lying in wait? Impossible for him to know.

It was then that he heard more cover fire. Salgado, already behind the grenade launcher, saw what Jonah was doing, and from his firing position was obliterating the edges of the beyond. Explosions rocked the world.

Pulling the next weapon, the pistol, he removed the silencer and tossed it away. He went loud with it, taking advantage of any noise, drawing attention away from those in the vehicles. Jonah advanced on the horde.

So close he could see the redness of gums holding sharp, curved teeth, aching to be drenched in his blood, and so many separate sets of teeth and claws, he didn't have to aim center mass.

He didn't have to aim at all. He simply moved the barrel and pointed at any of the many creatures and pulled the trigger.

Some fell dead. Some fell wounded.

One bullet punctured an eye, dropping the creature, and it was trampled by the onslaught of the ones behind it, claws reaching for him.

Another of his shots got one in the throat. Its teeth-lined mouth gagged as it reached into the open wound with clawed fingers, making it even worse.

The pistol clicked empty.

As he allowed it to fall to the ground, Jonah pulled the pin of the first incendiary grenade and threw it as far as he could.

It arced and landed somewhere within the churning mass of them. He hoped the distraction would work. He knew once activated, the grenade would burn for over thirty seconds. He didn't wait for the flash.

He pulled another pin, threw the grenade, as well as two more—he'd grabbed four—and as he wondered when, tremendous light grew and shone, casting shadows over a scrambling panic and growls of pain.

Incendiary grenades went from normal temperature to thousands of degrees, and flames were almost immediate. The weapons could burn through steel. They could even burn underwater.

Any Molters within the vicinity of the weapons were melted, and freshly wounded ones reacted by frustrated howling and growling.

Some Molters still wore tattered clothing from the people they'd molted from. Hanging loosely, it caught fire, making others catch fire too. Flaming Molters split the horde.

Fleeing the flames and the tremendous heat, the horde crumbled, avoiding the length of road where Jonah tossed grenades along the shoulder.

If the drivers drove away right now, they would gain enough speed to distance themselves before the Molters could converge.

Jonah withdrew his machete.

A voice screamed, "Jonah!"

It was Heike's voice. His stepdaughter's voice.

It was then Jonah realized the distraction he was attempting to provide would be the end of his people, because they weren't going to leave him behind. They were waiting for him.

Jonah had provided enough of a distraction. Creating a path for the convoy to drive through was the mission. He did an about-face.

Engines revved as Molters growled and snarled behind him, and they were so loud it was as if the horde was the height of a mountain.

A mountain he was running to get away from as its base constantly crumbled, sending down avalanches filled with bloodthirsty creatures.

Recognizable faces. Ecstatic to know he was almost to the rear vehicle.

But then sudden shock by Salgado. He frantically waved his hand. He'd seen something disturbing.

But Jonah made it. He grinned up at Salgado's worry, lifted the door handle, yanked the door open, seeing so many men crammed in there he knew they would have to make further room for him, and gladly, and lunged inside.

Except reaching hands to help him get in the vehicle, were quickly moving away.

While being dragged, a bloodthirsty squall moved over Jonah, and teeth rained down. On his back, he slashed with the machete while getting bit up his legs and stomach and arms and finally his neck and head.

There were so many on him, he was weighed down and unmoving, and

looked to the side.

A Molter mouthed the red rushing out of him. So much blood was on the ground already. He glimpsed two vehicles lurch forward. Henry, Heike, and Doreen were in the pickup, the lead vehicle.

Bernard, Donnelly, Philip, and Sven were crammed into the UV. Salgado manned the grenade launcher in the gunner's hatch, the rear vehicle in the convoy.

Both vehicles used bumpers. Even ran over Molters, as they'd already swarmed the truck and UV.

Teeth bit into Jonah as he was yanked in another direction.

Then another.

He couldn't see anything. He felt the sting of teeth as sharp as frayed steel, and sensed strength, starvation, hunger, and his own imminent death.

It was worth it though. What he'd done. To pry open a chink in the armor of the Molting and take advantage of it. His people were safe. They would live. He hoped he'd done enough. For his family.

The weight of the world was on his shoulders for what felt like an eternity but was really only a fraction of time. And now it was lifted away.

Jonah existed during a pocket of resistance as many had done before him, and now he was struggling for survival in his final moments too.

Nothing but a brief and momentary angular flicker of flame compared to the infinite, roaring bonfire that was life in this universe.

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CHAPTER 27

Jonah entered the UV. They'd helped him. She saw. He'd made it. He'd been safe.

For a moment, she thought maybe she could think of the memory differently. Change it so that Jonah remained within the up-armored UV Salgado guarded with the fully automatic grenade launcher.

But one of the big ones got him. A Behemoth bomb before it opened up. It dragged him away and then Jonah disappeared.

All he'd needed to do was get his legs inside and close the door behind him. The last Doreen saw of him, Jonah, her husband, was him swinging his machete around on his back before being dragged out of sight.

She snapped into the moment, realizing Heike was sobbing uncontrollably. Doreen was holding her hand without thinking about it, trying to comfort her daughter. Doing something robotic as a mother.

"He can't be dead. He can't be killed. It's impossible. We can't leave him! We must go back!"

"We can't," Henry said gently. "What do you think he would want us to do?"

Doreen knew the answer but didn't say.

Heike cried and squeezed her hand. "I'm so sorry, Mom!"

Doreen gently squeezed her daughter's hand in return. She closed her eyes, again wanting to go back in time, somehow, to decide to stop somewhere else to merge passengers. Somewhere safer. But the tragedy had occurred.

They were driving fast once again. The brightness and hot flames of the incendiary grenades were in the rearview mirror somewhere, burning out of view. Jonah's sacrifice had helped them get away.

The two drivers, Henry and Bernard, sped them further away from the madness of basic survival, but there were still sporadic claws and leaps.

The lesson of the incendiary grenades was a valuable one. Doreen knew there were more of the grenades in the truck bed from where Jonah retrieved them. Someone among them surely knew how to use them the same way. But no one needed to at the moment.

Salgado had been saving the grenades for the fully automatic grenade launcher, but he wasn't saving them anymore. He was attempting to fire them all.

Mini suns expanded within the ranks of creatures trailing them and the flashes instantly turned into gory bits, then smoke. The devastating weapon was keeping the closest Molters away.

But for how long? How many grenades were left? Doreen didn't know.

"Doreen," Henry said. "Shoot out the window."

Yes, she still needed to fight. She would mourn later.

Doreen rolled her window down, and took her other hand off her daughter's hand, picking up a weapon.

She glanced over to make sure her daughter still had earplugs in. And also her father.

Doreen braced the stock against her left shoulder. She shot the automatic rifle at the creatures trying to keep pace with the truck near the passenger side.

Some were hit in the body, some were tripped up by leg shots. But there were so many, all she needed to do was pull the trigger. The weapon clicked empty.

She loaded another magazine. And shot it until it was empty too.

Then she did it again. And again. Until it was empty of ammo too. She knew there was more ammo stored. Her Jonah had made sure.

"Are you OK, Mom?"

No. I imagine I never will be again. But for you . . . I will make sure to be.

"Yes."

Doreen placed a comforting hand on her daughter's hand once again. Gunfire had staggered her daughter's sadness, but it resumed again. This time quieter, an echo of the pain of loss from losing someone so important in her life.

Doreen didn't have to ask her daughter how she was doing. Her crying was the answer. Doreen felt the hand guard in her right hand, remembering what she'd done, and lowered the weapon so the barrel rested on the floorboard.

She turned to her father. "I did it."

Henry kept his focus on the road. "Good girl."

Shafts of light shone between the running creatures. The sun was rising. There weren't so many of them anymore. At least not on the sides. Molters were falling further and further behind.

It was then that Doreen allowed herself to weep.

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CHAPTER 28

The erratic chaos of their hunched and darting movement hadn't been spotted through binoculars in days. The horde likely deviated from heading north and were on a different hunting trail. Maybe different survivors were being hunted.

Doreen hoped not. She'd always hoped there were other survivors of course. But also the creatures got lost somewhere. And fell into some mysterious chasm forever. And none of them would ever see Molters again.

Or Behemoths. Or Infectors. And everything about them would end.

The rising structures of the port stood out as she'd imagined. She'd never been to this one in particular. All of what she saw was meant to transport people all over the world. Or locally for pleasure. Symbols of hope. Hints at a brighter future.

During the drive, she considered why they hadn't come here earlier. It seemed the safest place to be. But she remembered Jonah had learned about its potential safety while he was in grave danger, something he'd never had the chance to explain.

Before, the drive north wasn't the right time. And so many of their people were scattered once they'd left Henrytown for the cabin. If they'd made the drive north years ago, they would've abandoned loved ones. They probably wouldn't have made it.

Her father put the truck in park and pulled the emergency brake. Bernard parked the UV behind the truck.

About ten meters, Doreen noticed.

Salgado stretched and yawned over the grenade launcher.

It seemed the infested mountains and forests and cities of Europe would be in the past for good. Maybe everywhere, it would be as under control as they all hoped.

But even if it wasn't, what remained of mankind would unite to eradicate Molters once and for all. Doreen was sure of it.

They were hoping to find the massive cruise ship Jonah had described, even expected to. For some reason, Doreen imagined a line of survivors waiting to board safely, waving and welcoming them with human recognition and a natural hospitality for strangers.

But the ship was not there. No ships were. Left port already by people who had the same idea or sank. Sea water wasn't kind to stagnant boats. Especially ones the size of a cruise ship.

In the emptiness of where it should have been, there were waves and a sun peeking over the water. Once again, the assurance of a new day. One of many more to come.

Hopefully.

Which was good enough for anyone. Everyone who'd survived.

The beauty of the scenery couldn't make them forget those who'd been lost, but there was happiness for those who had survived the drive to the North Sea: Heike, Henry, Sven, Salgado, Donnelly, Bernard, Philip, and herself.

Thinking of her Jonah throbbed painfully somewhere in Doreen's stomach and chest. Everywhere inside her really. He'd been a part of her and always would be. Especially the one part of him remaining. Tiny still, but growing.

Doreen hadn't gotten the chance to tell him. She wondered if it was a boy or a girl. Months from now, she would know.

When Salgado jumped down from the gunner's hatch onto the pavement, he stumbled and nearly fell, getting laughs out of those already out of the vehicles.

"Yeah, real funny. I could have cracked my head open."

The laughs did not subside as Heike went running toward the sea.

"Not too close," Doreen told her.

Doreen appreciated Heike's curiosity. If Doreen had never witnessed such a large body of water before, she would feel the same way.

"It's beautiful!" Heike said. "*Opa*, hold my hand?"

"Sure, kiddo," Henry said.

Taking his granddaughter's small hand in his, both of them walked to get a closer look.

"I'm going to make a feast to celebrate this," Bernard said.

"We barely have any food left," Salgado said.

"Plenty of fish in the sea."

Hearing Bernard, Henry glanced back, and Doreen knew her dad was thinking of her mom. Jonah, her husband, was gone too. If only he could have lived to see sea water once again. Seas lead to oceans, and an ocean was a place Jonah spoke of with affection and often.

The others stretched or drank water from canteens or relieved themselves out of sight. It had been a long drive.

After a while, Henry and Heike came back, and everyone congregated as a group, looking at one another in silence. Until the quiet got too uncomfortable for Salgado.

"Well, what the heck do we do now?" Salgado said. "I mean, what happens next?"

Henry eyed him. "We go our own way I suppose."

Salgado looked out to the sea and was probably about to ask how and where and on what nonexistent boat, but a sound drew his attention and he turned.

An engine, although it wasn't a pickup truck. Or a UV. Or any vehicle they recognized.

"Holy crap," Salgado said. "Am I seeing a ghost?"

Doreen turned too, and someone was riding a motorcycle, driving it right

toward them. It was obvious the man's beard needed trimming.

His army green cold-weather jacket and pants were tattered and looked dragged through the mud, but still intact enough to keep him warm.

When he was close enough to them and everyone could see one another's smiles, he switched off the ignition of the street bike. He kicked the kickstand down, legging off it.

He looked exhausted, near to falling over, and was stained with dirt and dried blood head to toe.

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CHAPTER 29

Where there is a spark, there is potential for a blaze. There were so many rushing predators, it was as if he were witnessing a tornado passing overhead. Starving hunger was the driving force within all of them, the nucleus. Without being sated, it was unending.

The scarcity of their food, blood, so few humans, is what saved me.

And the sheer amount of them, their instincts forcing advancement of their kind as much as it was to feed.

Were it a few, especially one, and it latched onto him and fed for minutes, and he weren't armed with a machete, he would have died. But they'd fought over him. And being dragged in different directions caused them to group together.

As a result of the tremendous weight of all their pounding, running, and clawed footsteps, the area near him, the ground—as they were not careful with their potential meal—collapsed. But Jonah didn't fall alone.

They fell along with him, but luckily, he rolled under an outcropping. Molters climbed out to rejoin the rampaging horde, impossible to distinguish the scent of him from one another. It gave him a few minutes to rest. Well-needed rest.

Because of how tired he was, he knew he'd lost a lot of blood. It gave him the opportunity to apply the field dressing in the cargo pocket of his waterproof cold-weather pants. It had been in there for years. Along with the five-fifty cord he'd located at the military base in Oberstein.

While above ground and being dragged in different directions, the thickness of his cold-weather clothing and where he'd gotten bit kept him protected enough to remain alive. He must have been bitten by over a dozen Molters.

Although he'd been bitten a lot and badly—his body throbbed in different places head to legs—none of the Molters fed on him long enough to drain him. The ones feeding on him longest had lost their hold when he'd fallen into the cave.

Jonah had heard of people surviving Molter attacks. Henry was one of them. Even though he knew it was possible, Jonah honestly never thought he would survive if he were attacked. And when he'd imagined the scenario, it was by a lone Molter.

Still, he wasn't tip-top, nowhere near full-strength, so he needed to be extra cautious.

Within the confined space, there was growling so loud it was deafening. Loud enough to dampen the squall of the predators rushing above.

Jonah had fallen into a cave similar to the one he'd discovered near the cabin. It was when he'd learned the green Molters were each an Infector

bomb. The underground dwelling had saved his life.

Maybe it was how the convoy had been overwhelmed so quickly. It would explain how Molters could seemingly appear out of nowhere. Maybe they didn't only bury victims. Maybe they lived in underground caves they discovered, or even dug their own.

And after the weight of the horde crushed the ground and sent Jonah beneath it, thankfully it was away from the masses.

There were still Molters to deal with, ones yet to notice him, and thankfully, he'd held onto the machete.

It was nearly identical to the one he used before, years ago, to kill a Behemoth after ramming it with a truck. And the one he'd flung at Perry within the walls of Fort Perry. Jonah was always mentally prepared to fight Molters.

Knowing he needed to gain the upper hand quickly, and also not much of what remained of the field dressing left, he wrapped it around the tip of the blade.

Then he lit the field dressing on fire using the lighter always in his pocket.

After scooting out from under the outcropping, thankful the rushing horde above hadn't collapsed it on top of him, he raised the fiery blade.

Flames reflected off predatory glares locked on him.

Though weak, he lunged, using what energy he had left to chop at heads and faces and hack through veiny arms.

Claws lashed out, intent on dragging him to their ravenous mouths encircled by curved teeth, the steel traps of the Molting.

Jonah felt like he could collapse at any moment, so he let the sharpness of the machete do the work. He always kept his blades razor sharp.

He took advantage of them being as stunned to suddenly be in a cave as he was. Except Jonah was different than them. He had something to live for: a family. He heard himself grunting as he killed them.

Eventually yelling with as much frustration as their snarling and growling, angry at himself for failing at his mission to keep his people safer by going along with them. He should be in the UV protecting them still.

By attacking the horde, using himself as bait, as a distraction, Jonah had inadvertently put his people in more danger because he hadn't communicated his plan—there hadn't been time—and of course they weren't about to leave him behind.

Unless he was dead.

Exhausted, he allowed the machete to lower to his side.

The blade was covered in gore. The Molters were in three times as many pieces. The heat of their blood and entrails and openness of gashes steamed upward toward the dim light.

The speeding vehicles had lured the horde away. One upon thousands and thousands followed after the other.

He waited for hours and still heard some running the same direction. There

must have been millions.

Billions?

Eventually day dimmed and he couldn't see light anymore. Climbing out wasn't so difficult as the cave was not so deep. But right after emerging above in the dark of night, he was tackled by a lone Molter, a straggler of the horde. It was waiting for him.

A lone Molter taking him by surprise. It was what he'd always feared.

Except he'd been killing them for years. Even though he held a machete, Jonah kneed it in the teeth, feeling their sharpness puncture his skin through his army green pants.

As it struggled to get upright, Jonah stomped on its head. Not enough force to crush the skull completely, but enough to kill it.

Angrily, he kicked its body and it disappeared into the blackness of the cave when it fell below.

If another Molter attacked, he didn't think he would have the strength to fend it off. After inspecting all around him, thankfully there were no more. At least none he could see.

The openness of the road and grassy hills on both sides were trampled down and flat. Scorches marked, where the grenades had long burned out.

Jonah had survived. For how much longer, he could not know.

Initially he ran in the same direction the vehicles had gone, and also the creatures. But then he remembered. He did an about-face, running as fast as he could in the opposite direction. Toward the motorcycle they'd passed.

Another mission commissioned by the battle instincts of his inner radar. He must always remember the commitment he'd made to Doreen. But also, the promise he'd made to her father, Henry.

Not to die.

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CHAPTER 30

His wife could care less about how filthy he was. Doreen ran and leaped into his arms, kissing and hugging him.

"I knew you were still alive," Doreen said. "I knew it."

Jonah kissed her.

"Nice chopper, homie," Salgado said.

"Thanks, pal."

Doreen leaned around Jonah, inspecting the motorcycle. "I didn't know you could ride one of those."

"I rode dirt bikes when I was a kid. Same thing."

"Let me guess; the fuel tank was full and the keys were in it?"

Jonah shrugged, and Doreen shook her head and smirked.

"How'd you even find us?" Salgado said.

"First port north. It was my idea."

"But you've never been here before."

"Because he's part cat and he sensed where we are." Doreen's joy turned, and she began sobbing. "We left you!"

Jonah immediately embraced her, holding her close, an attempt to silence her regret. "I wouldn't have it any other way. For those who made it this far alive. And I made the decision it would be one less long ago. If it came to that."

"Listen up with those big ears of yours. Long ago you weren't married to me. Now you are. Remember that, too."

"Yes, ma'am. I will."

When Jonah glanced in Heike's direction, she buried her tearful face into his side, grappling her arms around him and Doreen both. Jonah dropped an arm over her shoulders.

"I thought," Heike gasped. "I thought—you were . . ."

"I'm here. Everything's going to be OK. OK?"

Heike looked up at him, unable to stifle her emotion, but nodded.

"You kept your promise," Henry said.

Not to die. For Doreen, but also for all of you, sir. Jonah hadn't forgotten. "Yes, sir."

Salgado pointed at him. "You and I and anyone else who wants to, is gonna have to have a drink together real soon."

"I gave up drinking."

"Oh. Well, I definitely need one. You celebrate with us. You watch while we, whoever," Salgado pointed at others, who nodded, "will do the drinking."

"You got it."

Jonah took a step back but soon found himself squashed at the center of the biggest group hug of his life, led by Henry who somehow had his arms around

everyone.

Doreen was always astonished by her husband's resilience. His strength and perseverance. So after the group hug, it was quite shocking to witness him sink to his knees and begin sobbing uncontrollably. He'd seen something.

She turned to look out into the shimmery waves of the North Sea.

An aircraft carrier nosed toward them. It was far away, but close enough to make out its form in the distance on the water.

Then two fighter jets slashed overhead leaving a roaring wake rumbling the sky.

"Molter-*effin*-killers!" Salgado shouted.

"What kind of aircraft are those?" Heike asked.

"Who cares, little girl?"

"Thank you," Jonah said to the ground, tears trickling into his beard and dripping off his nose onto the pavement. "Thank you . . . Thank you."

Doreen dropped a hand on Jonah's head and ran her fingers through his thick brown hair.

Salgado wiped at his eyes with the back of his hand and sniffed. "You did it, brother."

Jonah looked up at Salgado, holding Doreen's hand and standing. "*We* did."

Thinking back to the thunderstorm before Jonah left on his mission to find a safer place to live, he believed he'd heard aircraft. Now he was sure he'd been correct. On occasion, he'd sometimes mistaken thunder and storms for jet engines while he was awake.

But not while he was asleep.

The deeper part of his subconscious housed war gears identifying the engines correctly. Maybe now they could go dormant. Possibly for the rest of his life. He hoped so for his sake.

Jonah stood, excited. "I promised myself I would do this. We have to . . ." He felt as excited as a teenager. "How many chem lights do we have?"

"Man, we have so many of these things, I was gonna ask if I could take some home, homie."

Jonah grabbed the box of chem lights from Salgado. He was so thankful they weren't left behind. "Heike, everyone, come on. Pass these out. One in each hand. Crack 'em and shake 'em around."

“Dance party?” Heike said.

“Like at the cabin.”

“But there’s no music.”

“So what?”

“OK. Yay! Let’s wiggle!”

Cracking sounds made the chem lights glow faintly in the day light.

Jonah raised his hands in the air.

“You remember!”

“Sure, I do. I don’t want to be accused of not being a very good dancer ever again.”

“I take it back.”

The men; Bernard, Sven, Philip and Donnelly, but especially Henry, probably would’ve rather headed back south, unarmed, to fistfight Molters and even Behemoths, rather than participate in dancing.

Except Salgado.

“Holy smokes. Now we’re talking. Check this shit—sorry—*stuff*, out.” Salgado started breakdancing. “I *won’t-won’t-won’t* be *stopped-stopped-stopped*. Ah! Pulled something! Worth it!”

“What have you done?” Doreen said as she swayed.

“You heard him,” Jonah laughed. “He can’t be stopped.”

Salgado held his ankle, one arm in the air. “I haven’t danced in years!”

Doreen laughed along with everyone else. “It looks like you’ve been practicing for decades.”

Bernard, Donnelly, Philip, and even Sven, started moving in their own way along with the group, something they probably hadn’t done in years.

According to Heike’s reaction, she thought they’d never danced during their entire lives. She was about to accuse them, but Jonah shook his head at her.

“I don’t know what’s happening,” Henry said.

“Like this, *Opa*.”

Henry stood still as others danced around him. He looked perturbed as if he might say: Enough of this nonsense. We lost people. We shouldn’t be celebrating.

But it isn’t the first time friends died. For any of us. When most make it back alive, the last thing those who didn’t would want is for the survivors to only feel sadness.

So, what better time to celebrate? For who we lost. For their sacrifice. But especially for ourselves. Because our lives will go on.

Although there was confusion at first, Jonah didn’t have to explain any of it to his father-in-law.

“What if I move them like I’m playing the drums?” Henry said. “Does this count?”

“It’s great!” Heike said. “I’m doing it like you too! You play the drums?”

“When I was a youngster. I think I’m too old for this.”

“Oh, you definitely are, sir,” Salgado said as he snaked his arms, “but who cares?”

“Nobody’s ever too old to dance!” Heike exclaimed.

“The kid’s right. We need to celebrate.” Salgado slowed his moves. “Get something to eat for my hungry belly too. We got M-R-Es still. No offense, Bernard, I know you’re going to make us a feast eventually, but right now I’m going to pick my favorite M-R-E; spaghetti with hot sauce. And I’ll have my favorite dessert; pudding made from M-R-E extras.”

His eyes widened.

“I bet they got some tattoo artists on the aircraft carrier. Or at least some knucklehead who thinks he’s good at it.” Salgado took deep breaths, recuperating from the dance party. “Let’s get a couple M-K tattoos.” His eyes got bigger. “Who’s in?”

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CHAPTER 31

They were told they were lucky they arrived when they did. A mission, aboard the aircraft carrier, was planned. A horde was identified and located by air, moving south.

They were asked many questions. And then, even more questions. Including if they'd seen any other survivors during their drive. They all said no. The military personnel on the aircraft carrier hadn't either. They were checking boxes.

Before they were to hammer nails.

Jonah wanted to see. He explained he was prior service for the American military. He left out the part about being kicked out. They probably wouldn't have cared anyway.

Although there were laws against civilians taking part in military operations, Jonah was told those laws could be reinstituted later, and he was handed protective goggles.

Surrounded by armed soldiers from the secured safety onboard the aircraft carrier—as it moved further out to sea—Jonah watched the mushroom cloud expand in the distance. Soon after he also heard—and felt, and sensed—its destructive power.

He was witnessing the beginning of the eradication. The Molting would soon be under control. Maybe Molters would even be annihilated from Earth forever.

Jonah turned away from the destruction, being led by the soldiers in charge, freeing him from his responsibility, something he wasn't free of for years.

Before he was escorted to the comfort of the decks below, he saw a submarine shark fin the water. There were many more missions going on worldwide without his knowledge. But Jonah's missions were complete.

For others, their missions were only beginning, but *they* weren't his responsibility.

He hoped to get a good night's sleep tonight. One free of nightmares. He was looking forward to knowing Doreen's big secret. She mentioned having something important to tell him.

He'd longed for a fortification, a protection, something he didn't sense since Henrytown. Only now, aboard an aircraft carrier, had it come to fruition.

Wherever the aircraft carrier took them—it really didn't matter—and once they decided where to go next, Jonah wondered when Doreen wanted to go on their honeymoon.

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